



OPERATION COMBUSTION

Tilley Award 2004 Submission

Lancashire Constabulary

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Summary

Scanning

During a three-month period, Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service (L.F.&R.) attended 10 fires in the Astley Village area of Chorley. The next month saw five further fires, in which wheelie bins had been set alight and placed next to dwellings and stairways leading to those dwellings.

Analysis

Properties affected are a cluster of dwellings situated on a housing estate, on the outskirts of Chorley. They are owned by North British Housing Association (N.B.H.) and include 92 First and Ground floor Flats. They are 25yrs old and have 46 timber staircases for entry/exit. They are low cost homes, used to house a mixture of the community. The fires were deliberate, being more than juvenile nuisance. No sex, age, or class of the offender, or any motive was known. The victims were residents of the dwellings, who had not been differentiated by sex, colour, age or class.

Response

A multi-agency partnership was formed between the residents of Astley Village, N.B.H, the Police, L.F.&R., and Chorley Borough Council (C.B.C.).

The Police focussed patrols on the target area, utilising high visibility patrols and a mobile C.C.T.V. Van in conjunction with Council Neighbourhood Wardens for reassurance. Incidents and possible offenders were investigated and Intelligence and procedures were shared with LF&R. All partnership work was recorded on a Problem Orientated Policing (P.O.P.) database and data exchanged with N.B.H. re problem residents and guidance given to L.F.&R. regarding their Problem Orientated Fire Safety (P.O.F.S.) document run concurrently, named SABBATH.

L.F.&R. visited all Local High Schools, presenting Consequences of Arson Lectures to Year 9 and 10 pupils. All residents were offered FREE Home Fire Safety Checks.

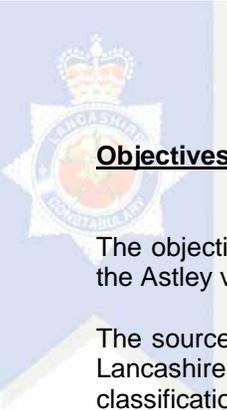
NBH instigated Residents/Partner meetings and worked with the Police in bringing about 3 evictions. They introduced a new Tenancy Agreement enabling them to evict problem tenants. They offered a reward via Crime-Stoppers for information leading to an arrest. They brought forward a £300,000 refurbishment programme to repair their properties, provided safety measures for residents and made environmental changes.

Assessment

As a result of this project and partnership working, arson decreased 100%, to zero.

N.B.H felt that without the support of the Partners, their residents would not have been re-assured in that everything possible was being done to assist them, or that the hierarchy at N.B.H. would not have released the £300,000.

After initial negative coverage, the project received positive media attention, with visits from both the Shadow Home Secretary and local Member of Parliament.



Objectives of the project

The objective of the project was to target and reduce the number Fires and crime-related incidents within the Astley village area of Chorley.

The sources which were consulted during the analytical phase of the project was information obtain from Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service (L.F.&R.) F.D.R.1. (House Fire Classification), F.D.R.3. (Rubbish fire classification), Chorley Borough Council (C.B.C.) Neighbourhood warden patrol sheets, Cleansing and Environmental Department figures, Police crime recording (INDE) and sleuth Control Room Systems (CRS) and North British Housing (N.B.H.) complaint and repair logs.

During a three-month period, L.F.&R. attended ten fires in Astley Village. This was an unusually high number, in a location, not known for high levels of criminal activity.

The following month saw five further fires, in which mobile wheelie bins had been set alight and placed next to dwellings and stairways leading to dwellings, this gave rise to a concern relating to the endangerment of life. During one of the incidents a young mother sustained a broken leg after jumping from a first floor window to escape a fire.

The above factors meant that the usually quiet area received recognition that it needed attention and priority over other problems within the policing area of Chorley.

A working partnership was set up with the Community, C.B.C., Chorley Police, the Registered Social Landlord in the area - North British Housing (N.B.H.) and L.F.&R. This partnership was required to ensure the objectives of the project were focused and beneficial to all Partners. A prevention of further fires and crimes would lead to a restoration of confidence in Authorities involved and improve the quality of life of that Community.

Definition of the problem

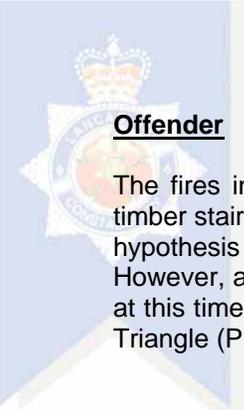
Location

The affected properties of Clough Acre, Timber Brook, Banistre and Millcroft are a cluster of maisonettes and flat dwellings situated on a 1970's housing estate, on the outskirts of Chorley, a well-established market town. The dwellings are owned by N.B.H. and include 92 self contained one and two bedroom First/Ground floor Flats. They are 25yrs old and have 46 timber framed staircases situated at the side of the block for entry and exit to the premises. They are low cost high-density homes, which house families, single parent families, pensioners, single males/females and a small number of residents involved in drugs and crime. In particular circles within Chorley this area is seen as an alternative Council estate.

Victim

The victims are residents of these dwellings, who have not been differentiated by sex, colour, age or class. The only common denominator/motive is that all the victims have a connection to the flats. They are in danger of having their property burnt down and sustaining life threatening injuries.

The Police and L.F.&R. and N.B.H. are victims as they are affected when a fire is started, as L.F.&R. have to attend all incidents of fire and investigate the cause. Police will deal with the crime, cordoning off areas, traffic/pedestrian control, evacuations any aftermath, which causes a strain on resources. N.B.H. will have to deal with the needs of residents, repair damage, re-house affected tenants, and board up premises. C.B.C. will need to look at environmental conditions and the cleansing of the area.



Offender

The fires in the wheelie bins were being deliberately set alight and spread quickly from the bins to the timber staircases. This was more than juvenile nuisance; it is arson and is endangering lives. There was the hypothesis that the rubbish fires were being set by juveniles and they were just getting out of control. However, after talking with residents and analysing the incidents no sex, age, class of offenders was known at this time. This meant that we could not focus sufficiently on the offender aspect of the Problem Analysis Triangle (P.A.T.), as we could ascertain little information about them.

Response to the problem

A multi-agency partnership was formed between the residents of Astley Village, N.B.H., Police, L.F.&R., and C.B.C. This was to ensure that all interested parties had a say in the direction of the project.

Residents were consulted at a public meetings and a sub-committee of residents were appointed and they met at 6-weekly intervals, following on from this consultation process a number of actions that involved all Partners was agreed.

The partnership agreed that the Police should initially conduct some type of enforcement this took the form of focussed patrols on the target area, utilising high visibility patrols. All actions/patrols taking place within the target area were monitored daily on a Police monitoring system (Sleuth). The Police Criminal Investigation Department (C.I.D.) pro-actively investigated any incidents and gathered evidence on possible offenders. C.I.D. also involved themselves in the residents and Partnership meetings and explained how the Police gather and act on Intelligence (INTL) supplied by members of the public, Covert Human Intelligence sources (C.H.I.S.) and Intl from Police officers. These procedures were shared with, and adopted by L.F.&R.

C.B.C. obtained an overt mobile CCTV van, which was situated on the estate. C.B.C. Neighbourhood Wardens were also to patrol the area showing a visible presence for public reassurance.

All partnership work carried out, was recorded by the Problem Orientated Policing (P.O.P.) Coordinator at Chorley Police Station and put onto a database. This information was shared with N.B.H. and allowed them to identify problem residents.

The information was also shared with L.F.&R. providing them with and insight into P.O.P.'s and guidance was given to L.F.&R. regarding their Problem Orientated Fire Safety (P.O.F.S.) initiative.

L.F.&R. were developing their own P.O.P.'s system and they renamed COMBUSTION - SABBATH, which was run concurrently with this project and was the first of its kind within the L.F.&R.

L.F.&R. visited all the Local High Schools, presenting 'Consequences of Arson Lectures' to Year 9 and 10 pupils (13-15 years olds).

All residents were offered FREE Home Fire Safety Checks, which assessed the furniture, smoke alarms, escape routes and planned what to do if they had a fire.

L.F.&R. also commenced a policy that all Fire engines after attending any incident within the Chorley area, on return to the station, would pass the Astley Village location and visually assess the area reporting fire hazards (build up of rubbish etc.) to the relevant Partner for action to be taken by them.

N.B.H. and the Police shared all data regarding three residents, who were subsequently evicted. They also introduced a new short-term 3-month Tenancy Agreement. This enabled them to evict problem tenants with little delay before they became a major problem.

N.B.H. offered a reward via Crime-Stoppers, for information leading to an arrest for any arson offences at their properties and brought forward a £300,000 refurbishment programme to repair their properties. Part of this refurbishment after receiving advice of L.F.&R. was to include fitting and applying cladding and fire retardant paint on stairways making them safe.



They also provided safety measures for residents in the form of fitting Passive Infra Red Detectors (P.I.R.'s) to properties to improve lighting.

Environmental changes in the form of tidying up after the offences and securing empty property, constructing safe storage for wheelie bins, and the cutting back of foliage improving visibility and opening up the area surrounding the flats.

Assessment/Evaluation

The evaluation of this project was conducted with emphasis on what the Partners were trying to achieve. This assessment will demonstrate that the problem declined enough to call an end to the response and the fact that the response is sustainable providing an exit strategy for the Police, leaving behind capable guardians with responsibility for the area.

As a result of this initiative and partnership working, arsons at the targeted area decreased 100% to zero. The actions of the Partners influenced this problem in a number of ways.

The Police enforcement action, in particular the thorough investigation of all incidents, focused on the evidence required to lead to arrest of any offenders. A number of suspects were interviewed, however there was insufficient evidence to charge any with an offence. The offender profile built up showed that young adult males were possibly the offenders, setting fires en-route home having left the local Town Centre Public Houses, reckless discarding of cigarettes, and also one male who lived at the flats, made a number of calls when fires were discovered was believed to have started some of the fires.

The area was targeted with high visible patrols, which were both Police and C.B.C. Neighbourhood Wardens and was visited on 60 occasions during the initial period from the first of May to the middle of June. This was monitored via the Sleuth Intelligence System and included mobile and foot patrols in order to detect offenders and to provide reassurance to the residents.

During this month two suspects were arrested for Public Order offences in the area and Police and C.B.C. Neighbourhood wardens began to 'bridge the gap' formed between residents and Authority.

A mutual working partnership with Police, C.B.C., L.F.&R. and N.B.H. was established and private meetings were these meeting run using the S.A.R.A. model and actions and responses recorded on the P.O.P. database, there were also public meetings with the residents.

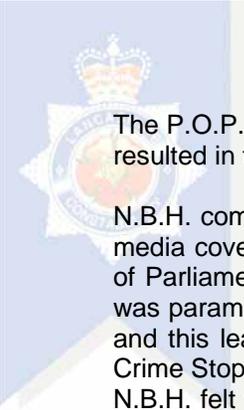
This operation was copied by L.F.&R. and their version, (P.O.F.S.) named SABBATH, ran alongside this one. This was new to L.F.&R and the P.O.P. Coordinator gave guidance throughout the project.

The jointly funded and manned (Police/LF&R) Arson Reduction Team stated this was the best example of P.O.F.S. and Partnership Working they had seen in the County thus far. And used it as a template for the training of P.O.F.S. The P.O.P. was universally recognised by all 50 Fire Officers at Chorley and all of whom were engaged in the Community Safety and Drive Past measures and there was a good willingness to work together.

L.F.&R. have been shown best practise in documenting their partnership working via P.O.F.S. and assistance from the Police is still ongoing. L.F.&R. are now conversant with the Police INTL system and comfortable with passing on information and have been supplied with the latest photos of repeat criminals/potential arsonists.

All addresses in the target area were visited, with the offer of FREE Home Fire Safety Checks; the result of which was two houses having fire alarms installed by L.F.&R. This was however mostly due to the fact that N.B.H. have good Fire Safety measures already in place and recently modernised this aspect in their dwellings.

The tasks set by the Partnership were completed by L.F.&R. and two local High Schools were visited and Consequences of Arson Lectures were given.



The P.O.P. Coordinator adhered to the data protection protocol with N.B.H. and provided information, which resulted in the eviction of three suspected offenders.

N.B.H. completed all their tasks, with the desired results, both as previously mentioned and received good media coverage, promoting the area, with visits from both the Shadow Home Secretary and local Member of Parliament, to the location after initial negative media coverage. N.B.H. felt the support of the Partners was paramount in the perception of their residents that they were doing all that was possible to assist them and this led to the forming of a Residents Forum. The reward put in place, was easily manageable via Crime Stoppers, although no information or intelligence was passed via this method.

N.B.H. felt that this partnership was one of good practise and will share it with other areas as such. It was also felt that without the pressure placed on the hierarchy at N.B.H. by the Partnership, the £300,000 would not have been accelerated and it was highlighted the need for more contingency money to be put aside.

Overall there were few difficulties affecting the Partners, however the Police did struggle with having a suitable place to fit Covert Cameras, due to a lack of INTL on who was in fact responsible for the offences and the size of the area affected. They also had few resources to investigate the incidents, due to a number of major enquiries on-going within the Department.

L.F.&R. also struggled due to a lack of resources, initially they returned to their base via the target area, after time, this ended.

North British Housing encountered a lot of criticism from residents initially, however with the support of the other Partners they were able to show they were doing all they could. Some residents were proving difficult in that they did not feel responsible for their property and would do little to help themselves, an example being they would not take responsibility for the targeted wheelie bins and some felt they shouldn't even clean their own windows.

From a Police, L.F.&R. and N.B.H. point of view, the problem could have been picked up earlier, possibly after three fires and Partner interventions put in place at that earlier stage.

Also at that stage, a positive media message of Control could have been given, to outline the work being done and to reassure residents that all that could be done, was being done. A joint name for the P.O.P./P.O.F.S. could have been adopted by the Services, to negate any confusion.

For the Police, enquiries are not yet complete, as offenders have not yet been found, however they will continue and hopefully have the desired result. For N.B.H., more money could be set aside for such contingencies, which would not encroach on any other projects.

As a result of this initiative, although they had worked together previously in isolation, a strong bond has now emerged between the Partners.