

NORTHFIELDS PROJECT

PROJECT BRINGS PEACE BACK TO CITY ESTATE

LEICESTERSHIRE CONSTABULARY, HAMILTON LOCAL POLICING UNIT, ENGLAND, 1999

SUMMARY:

The Northfields Project was launched in response to what had been the problems of a traditional high crime area of Leicester. The area known locally as Northfields is in fact three local Authority owned estates, there being Northfields itself, Morton Estate and Tailby Estate. Adjacent to these areas are two small areas of owner-occupied property and a small Industrial Estate. The whole of which comprises Police beats E10 and E11. Whilst these beats make up a small area of the Policing Unit as a whole they were responsible for 30% of the total crime on the Unit.

The offenders and victims were often neighbours. The Area had low esteem and saw itself as forgotten. Other agencies had similar problems. The Housing Department, despite the fact that the housing stock was good, had difficulty in letting these properties. New tenants were often targetted and were driven out by harassment or by being subjected to repeated criminal acts. Bullying was rife in the area.

We decided to adopt a problem-solving approach to the concerns of the community. We hoped by tackling some of the underlying issues of the area in partnership with other agencies to reduce crime by 30% in comparison with the preceding two years. We also hoped that by doing so we could improve the quality of life for the residents. To have a real impact on the causes it was necessary to allow sufficient time for sustained action. It was determined that the Project would run for 2 years from 1st April 1997 until 31st March 1999. After the initial stages of identifying partners, gelling as a team, enthusing each other and identifying action, a number of initiatives were introduced with the holistic approach to tackle issues which affected the quality of life for the residents. Inevitably some of these were short term initiatives but the thrust has been to deliver long term solutions. A vital element of the project was the active involvement of the community members themselves.

The impact of the Project has been dramatic. Crime has reduced by 31.8% with some categories of crime being reduced by a greater amount. The plague of some communities, incidents of disorder, has shown a very real decrease and the often hidden crime of domestic violence has been tackled with revictimisation rates declining. The Local Authority Housing Department are delighted with the take up for lettings on the estate and the fact that tenants are now staying. The Project has drawn praise from both the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister declaring the achievements as an example of excellent partnership working. There is still work to do but a real, and I believe, substantial start has been made.

SCANNING

The area known as Northfields in fact comprises of three Local Authority owned Council Estates, Northfields itself, Morton Estate and Tailby Estate. Adjacent to the estates are two small areas of owner-occupied properties making a total of 3304 houses in the area. Close by there is also a small light industrial estate. The whole area comprises Police Beats E10 and E11.

The area was, and had been for a number of years, seen as a high crime "problem" area. The amount of crime on these two police beats was totally out of proportion to their size, Northfields accounting for a third of all crime on the Local Policing Unit.

But it was not only recordable crime that was the problem, anti-social behaviour was rife and hostility to both the police and other agencies an everyday occurrence. The public perception was that the police were frightened to go on to the estate and whilst there is no evidence to suggest this was true it is believed some officers avoided the area unless detailed to respond to an incident.

The demands on the police far outweighed resources available. They were responding to the same type of incident daily - rarely seeking to reduce them and evidence suggests dealing successfully with very few. The approach could be described as reactive or fire-fighting.

A trip around the area showed that the police were not the only agency with problems. Although the Local Authority housing stock was of good quality, 2/3 bedroom houses, front and rear gardens, double-glazing and central heating the reality was that no-one wanted to live there. Large numbers of houses and certain streets had become almost derelict. New tenants were hard to find and when they did move in they would often leave very quickly, sometimes within 24 hours. This situation was nothing new. Newspaper cuttings going back over 20 years describe Northfields as: "Trapped by circumstances beyond their control", "A

forgotten area", "This area is a right shambles", and "Hope at last for the worst estate in Leicester".

After the initial scanning of the problems of the area it became obvious that short term, single initiatives would not have a significant impact. There was a need to "bite the bullet" and look at the whole range of problems faced by the community. It was also clear that the police working on their own could achieve little. There was a need to work with others in partnership to develop coordinated, effective actions.

ANALYSIS

So what were the problems?

Police crime data was examined to identify crime issues. The total number of response crimes on Hamilton Local Policing Unit was about 6000 per annum. In the year April 1996 to March 1997 Beats E10 and E11 accounted for 1,903, almost a third. This was totally out of proportion to their size, bearing in mind that the Policing Unit contains 4 other Local Authority estates, all of which are larger than Northfields.

In particular the offence of burglary in people's homes was a major problem. The following figures detail dwelling house burglaries for the two years preceding the commencement of the project:

■ April 1995 - March 1996	434
■ April 1996 - March 1997	397

These figures represent a burglary rate (per 1,000 households) of 131 and 120 respectively. This is in comparison to a national rate of 27 per 1000 households. If you lived in Northfield you were five times more likely to have your house broken into.

Other categories of crime showed a similar picture. In the years 1992-96 crime nationally in England and Wales was reduced by 10%. In

Leicester the crime reduction was lower showing a reduction of 4%.

Crime on the Northfields, however, bucked this trend. In 1995 the area experienced a 27% increase compared to 1994 and a further 10% in 1996 compared to 1995. Overall between 1992-96 crime on the estate increased by 20%.

There was a similar picture with disorder incidents. Although exact figures are not available for the period 1995 to 1997 in July 1996 disorder on the estate was a nightly occurrence. Large groups of youths roamed the estate committing criminal offences, often terrifying residents.

Further research with Leicester City Council presented a similar picture. As stated earlier the housing stock on Northfields was good. However, due to the problems on the streets the letting of the properties was difficult. The average time for letting a house on the estate was about 3 months, although empty properties in certain streets where the problems were more acute took considerably longer to let, if in fact they ever were. Empty boarded up houses, graffiti scrawled on walls, and fences broken down was a poor advert for the area and depressing for residents.

This in turn brought its own problems. Although ordinary families did not want to live on the estate certain people, i.e. criminals, did. The Council, rather than leave houses empty would let them to anyone who was prepared to live in them. This resulted in drug dealers and other criminals taking up the tenancies and living in an area in which they felt comfortable and confident to continue unhindered their unlawful activities. This was a major contributory factor to the downward spiral of the estate.

It also became evident that when tenancies were taken up by law-abiding people supporting these new residents was extremely difficult. Research showed 63% of new residents left within the first 12 months of their tenancy unable to stand the pressures any longer.

Further research with the Council helped give a more detailed profile of the estate. This information showed a quarter of the population consisted of children between 0-14 years and a further 25% consisted of people aged between 15-29 years. Single parent households represented 9% of all households.

Using both this information and the crime data, together with the personal experiences from officers policing the estate, the key elements which contributed to a poor quality of life for the residents of the Northfields Estate had been identified.

RESPONSE

So what were we going to do?

First, the community were informed of police intentions. A series of public meetings and "Road Shows" were held in the area to clearly state the target of achieving a 30% reduction in crime and seeking the help and support of the residents.

Similar meetings were held with possible partners to seek their commitment and help. The aim was to show that by sharing information and working together a great deal could be achieved and that all partners meant business.

From these meetings came the West Humberstone Community Forum, a group of residents and agencies working together to identify not only problems but possible solutions. The three key areas the group tried to address were:

- Crime and Disorder
- Health Issues
- Young Persons

The group included representatives from Police, Social Services, employment programmes, Churches, Schools, Health Centres, Housing Department as well as residents. The Forum formed a strategy group

dedicated to the improvement of the area and the attraction of funding and resources.

From a policing perspective there were several issues to address as priorities. Firstly there was a need to raise the profile of the police on the Estate. The level of dedicated foot patrol officers was increased from two to four. Officers were carefully selected from across the policing area with specific skills. It was recognised that the work they would be asked to do would not be everyone's "cup of tea".

A firm stance was adopted on enforcement, realising that there was a need to recover lost ground. The approach was very much information and intelligence lead policing where key criminals were targeted on the estate. The number of search warrants executed on drugs and stolen property increased dramatically.

The help of the courts was sought to remand people in custody if grounds for doing so existed. Applications were made for strict conditions i.e. curfew, if criminals were granted bail. These conditions were rigorously enforced.

Several high profile operations were launched which involved arrest and stop and check campaigns, targeting key offenders but equally showing the law-abiding people, the majority, that the police were almost continually present to support them.

Harassment and bullying were another key problem that needed to be grasped. This was one of the major de-stabilising effects on the Estate, the reason people refused tenancies, and when they did move in why they moved out so quickly.

Again, a strong approach was taken; all incidents were reviewed on a daily basis - no incident was too small to bother about.

The police worked closely with the local Council undertaking joint investigations with local housing officers meeting residents often

away from the Estate to discuss the situation they found themselves in.

The use of covert technical equipment such as cameras to obtain evidence was increased.

The Council showed a strong commitment with police support and employed professional witnesses to live on the Estate in key streets to gain evidence in order to pursue prosecutions when tenants had been too frightened to report incidents.

The police worked closely with the legal department of the Council. Together the Conditions of Tenancy for Council residents were re-written, tightening up sections on criminal and anti-social behaviour. If these were breached information would be shared and disorderly tenants taken before the Civil Court to seek an injunction to restrain their behaviour, or in extreme cases seeking repossession of their homes.

It was recognised at an early stage that the letting of empty property was a key problem on the Estate but that to let them to criminals or drug dealers was self-defeating.

A procedure was devised that when prospective tenants applied for houses in the area they were required to sign a consent form for the police to disclose their previous convictions to the Council.

The police would then release their convictions for the past 3 years. The fact that someone had convictions did not exclude them but if that conviction related to a specific offence likely to cause concern or annoyance to the neighbours i.e. supplying drugs, handling stolen property etc. they would be refused a house.

Work was also carried out to attract new tenants. A positive advertising campaign specifically aimed at people in private rented accommodation was launched - highlighting the good houses and benefits of the area in order to attract them to become residents.

The Housing Department also employed specialist officers to support existing tenants to identify and address problems in the early stages rather than when they became major issues.

The police and the Council worked together to address some of the causes of crime on the Estate. Burglary in people's homes was a major problem. The burglary rate being almost five times the national average. Research showed most burglaries were via rear gardens particularly from empty properties. Together they devised stronger improved fencing for the rear of houses together with stronger alley gates. Security lights were also installed at the rear of houses which were believed to be most vulnerable.

Funding has also been awarded for the setting up of a task force. Four local long-term unemployed people have been recruited and trained. They patrol the Estate undertaking minor external repairs to fencing, walls or pavements. They remove quickly any dumped rubbish dealing with it at an early stage before it becomes a problem. They also act as a reporting mechanism for the local Housing Department. It is hoped this initiative will significantly improve the appearance of the Estate.

The community itself approached the Council to install CCTV on the Estate and there are now 5 cameras providing a watching eye over the residents.

A constant thread running throughout the whole project was community consultation, asking the residents what they saw as their priorities. The local Residents and Tenants Association, with support from the police, surveyed every house in the area, asking what their problems were, what changes they saw as important. This information has proved invaluable not only in understanding the communities we serve but in bidding for resources to achieve goals.

As stated earlier disorder on the Estate was almost a nightly occurrence. To tackle this the police launched "Northfield Football Scheme" that was run by two local officers. It ran every

day throughout the school summer holiday (July - August) to give the young people an alternative to hanging around and potentially getting into mischief. It takes place during the day for children up to 12 years and in the evening for older youths and in fact men up to 40 years old attend. Outside the holiday it runs for 3 nights per week.

The project is supported by the local professional football club and local stores provide refreshments. The youths have been on trips to professional football clubs such as Manchester United and Aston Villa and a small group went on a football tour to Scotland.

The results of the project have been amazing; the attitude to the police has changed dramatically from negative to positive. The young people have been shown there is life off the Estate and that they can achieve success.

One elderly lady wrote after her granddaughter had attended the Project, "I must write to you for the brilliance of your young police officers. I have lived on the Estate for 61 years and it's the best thing that has happened".

But disorderly youths are not the only young people on the Estate. As reported earlier there are a significant number of young children living in the area. A partnership was formed with the local Health-Centre who have set up a local Mother and Toddler Group which is run from a police and community house situated in the heart of the area. Courses have also been arranged to provide support and advice for parents having difficulties with children whether that is a baby that won't settle or a difficult teenager.

Domestic violence was another crime which it was felt had an unsettling effect on the estate. Again, the police worked with the local Health Centre, Tenants Association and Housing Office to ensure their staff recognised the problem of violence in relationships and understood what to do if they came across this type of situation. The local Domestic Violence Officer also endeavoured to ensure that if an

incident were reported an officer would attend and speak to the victim within 24 hours.

It was accepted that by taking this course of action the number of recorded incidents was likely to increase but the police were prepared to accept this if the numbers of reports of re-victimisation could be reduced. It was hoped that by tackling the problem at an early stage by addressing some of the underlying causes and offering support to victims and on occasions perpetrators, these type of incidents could be prevented from occurring again.

Throughout the course of the project the partners have developed a joint media approach. Each initiative and development has received publicity, not only to spread word of what we is being done but also to let the community of Northfields know that things had changed, that they were no longer a forgotten area but a place where positive things happened.

ASSESSMENT

But has it worked?

Obviously one of the main aims was to reduce recorded crime by 30% for police beats E10 and E11 during the course of the project in comparison with the preceding two years. Crime at the conclusion of the project showed a reduction of 31.8% and for some categories the reduction was greater. See Appendix 1 for more detail.

These figures are reflected in the overall burglary rate (per 1000 households) for the area over the past 4 years.

Burglaries in people's homes (per 1000 households)

■ 1995/1996	131
■ 1996/1997	120
■ 1997/1998	82
■ 1998/1999	44

In relation to incidents of disorder due to a change in the technology it is not possible to produce figures for incidents for the period 1995-1997. Although as stated earlier fairly major disorder was almost a nightly occurrence. What can be demonstrated is that research of the Leicestershire Constabulary Insight computer system for the corresponding periods shows a significant decline of such incidents. Research also showed that there was no evidence of displacement in other areas.

For the period 1st November 1997 to 27th March 1998 and the period 1st November 1998 to 27th March 1999 incidents of disorder show a decrease of 41% from 92 to 54.

It is worth pointing out that the types of incidents that are now received are on a much smaller scale than were received previously.

Domestic violence was also an area it was hoped to affect. The Project was launched on the 1st June 1998 and a comparison was undertaken of its first 6 months until 30th November 1998 comparing it with the same period of 1997. The figures showed an increase in reported offences. This was what was expected and indeed hoped for but what was achieved was a significant reduction of repeat victims.

■ 1997

19 repeat victims of 81 total incidents reported

■ 1998

4 repeat victims of 95 total incidents reported

These are only small numbers taken over a short period and it is not claimed that the problem is solved but what has been shown is a commitment to study and tackle difficult issues together.

Research from Leicester City Council shows similar improvements. Research shows that prior to the commencement of the project 63% of new

tenants moved out of the area in the first year of their tenancy this has now been reduced to 19%. Not perfect but a vast improvement.

The fact that people now stay provides stability and a sense of belonging for the Estate. Comments from the partners also show a change in perception. The Local Housing Office Manager stating, "The area has never been so quiet." and the local Health Visitors commenting, "The whole atmosphere has changed the local children seem calmer and more relaxed".

But perhaps the most telling comment is from a local man in his mid-thirties who has been involved in crime on the Estate for most of his life, "This area is crap now, you used to be able to buy stolen gear or drugs - now you can't get anything!" This was taken as a compliment and the police were able to reassure him that from his point of view it would get worse still!

However, it wasn't all plain sailing. There have been problems! Having identified key people, particularly police officers, stopping them being abstracted and taken away to the other duties was a constant problem.

There was also a certain amount of friction between other partners particularly local residents who would, on occasions, view certain agencies as professional meddlers - again situations which needed delicate handling.

From a police perspective it was felt whilst accepting projects like these needed a champion that in this instance it may have been too much police lead and the officer leading the project felt that he may have taken too much of a leading role.

Some of the Agencies contacted at the beginning were also wrong; some key players were not invited. Others that were invited were representatives too low in the organisation to make decisions.

Again from a police point of view research was placed on the force "Insight" system which was launched half way through the Project that

would have been invaluable at its commencement to assist in the identification of problems.

The Northfields is not perfect now, it still has problems but a start has been made which can be built upon and it has been demonstrated that no one group has all the answers but that by working together success can be achieved.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Inspector Jim Donaghy; Leicestershire Constabulary; Hamilton Local Policing Unit

NOTES

The Northfields Project is fully supported by the East Area Senior Management Team and the Project and its aims form part of the Area Business Plan agreed by the Chief Constable. At the commencement of the Project the officers involved were Inspector Jim Donaghy; PS Neil Hancock; PC Alex Walmsley; PC Kim Potter; PC Clive Jones; and PC Mark Hayes.

However, after the first year PC's Walmsley, Potter and Jones took up new roles in the organisation and were replaced by PC Ian Wardle; PC Andy Cree; and PC John Kennedy.

Although these officers were the key personnel involved in the Project all officers at Hamilton Local Policing Unit were briefed in the aims of the initiative and recognised it as a priority. All the beat officers involved in the Project received training in both the concept and application of Problem Orientated Policing from Professor Nick Tilley of Nottingham Trent University.

The East Area as a whole piloted POP's for the Leicestershire Constabulary assisted by Andrew Leigh and Tim Read of the Crime Reduction Group based at The Home Office in London.

In its early stages the Project was supported by a computer package developed by PS Paul King which enabled officers to identify "Hot Spots"

(clusters of incidents) which resulted in a police response.

A new system "Insight" has now been developed and is in use. Insight is linked directly with the police command and control system and there is little doubt this tool is of major assistance to the officers in identifying problems. If this system had been in place at the commencement of the Project it would have been invaluable in the identification and analysis of problems.

The only extra funding by the police was £3000 per year to assist in various initiatives they were undertaking.

The rest came from the redistribution of resources but fell within existing budgets. The CCTV system cost £75,000 and was paid for by the local Council. The upgrade of fencing and security lighting coming from funds held by the Council. These costs have now been fully

recouped by the increase of receipts from rented properties which were previously unoccupied.

Key personnel in the Leicester City Council who worked on the Project are: Mike Forester, Director of Housing; Pat Hobbs, Deputy Director of Housing; Andy Keeling, Nev Senior, Vijay Dajour, and Ian Stapleton of the Housing Department; Faizel Hajat, Legal Services. The Tenants and Residents Association also offered unqualified support and advice. Particularly thanks should be given to: Diane Cank, Sharron Rossington, Carole Simpson, Terry Herbert, and Adrian Waite. Without these people and their links to the community a project of this type lacks credibility.

As has been said earlier no-one would ever claim Northfields is perfect but it has been demonstrated that by showing determination and a commitment to work together longterm success can be achieved and sustained.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Crime incidents 1995 to 1999

Year	1995 TO 1999 2 YEAR TOTALS						Percent
	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	95/97	97/98	
Dwelling House Burglary	405	368	270	137	773	407	-47%
Burglary Other Than Dwelling	279	271	163	144	550	304	-44%
Theft from Motor Vehicle	216	260	141	171	476	315	-33%
Theft of Motor Vehicle	102	99	91	87	201	178	-11%
All Crime	1944	1903	1452	1170	3847	2622	-31.8%