

Common cause

The image of the bobby on the beat is imprinted in the minds of the public when it comes to British policing. Syreeta Lund reports on the Met's Safer Neighbourhoods style of policing in Woolwich, which aims to bring a dedicated police presence back to the streets.

A curtain twitches as I cross through the middle of the cardboard-coloured towering council flats of the Barnfield Estate in Woolwich, southeast London. I am flagged by officers from the Woolwich Common Safer Neighbourhood Team, dedicated to the neighbourhood and carrying out regular patrols on foot and by bike.

The team includes a sergeant, two police officers and four community support officers. Although residents are aware of our presence; instead of a two-fingered salute or a hail of stones from kids, as some of the police officers have experienced in the past, we are greeted by a smiling man waving manically.

He would like to speak to us; he wants to say what a difference the officers have made to life on the estate.

Colin Greenway, 47, has been a resident of the Barnfield Estate for ten years, and although he admits he used to be involved in crime himself and is a reformed heroin addict, he has turned over a new leaf and believes the community has too.

'Since the officers have come into the neighbourhood it's scared off the drug dealers; they see the officers. Before, I would not go out to the shop or out on the estate after 6pm, but things are different now, you feel safer. The sight of police officers and community support officers riding around on their bicycles has scared the drug dealers away,' he says.

The Safer Neighbourhood



Credit: Howard Sayer

PC Dale Openshaw and PC Adam Calladine patrol on bikes

Team was set up in June 2004 and backed by funding from the Metropolitan Police Authority and the Greater London Authority. The 26.6million budget for the Met, agreed as part of Mayor Ken Livingstone's annual budget, is topped up through council tax.

The aim is for the Met to have 96 neighbourhood teams in place by the end of 2005, but a

question still hangs over where the funding will come from in the future.

The programme runs for four years and the aim is to have a dedicated team in every ward across London.

This scheme puts dedicated police officers and CSOs into a neighbourhood to tackle local problems and provide reassur-

ance as well as helping with long-term solutions, particularly around anti-social behaviour.

Reported crime has been cut by almost a third on the Woolwich Common Estate, from 127 in 2003 to 84 up to November last year. On the Barnfield Estate, recorded crime has also been reduced to 120 from 139 last year since the intro-

duction of the team.

Foot patrols are nothing new though; police officers were treading their regular beats decades ago. However, since the move towards patrols in panda cars, there have been calls from both the police and the public to re-instate more visible foot patrolling on the streets.

The Woolwich Common Team, made up of Sgt Dale Openshaw, PC Adam Calladine, PC Bill Smart and CSOs David Lennone, Donald Lopes, Leonie Wilson and Maria Packer, cannot be abstracted from their work in the community.

Sgt Openshaw says that there was already a home beat team in the area, but that they could be taken away from their beat to work in other areas.

War zone

'My experience of the Woolwich Common Neighbourhood was that, during the summer months, it used to be like a war zone. There was every kind of anti-social disorder you can think of, we had to call out the TSG (Territorial Support Group) regularly. Fire engines were being attacked and would not go in without police protection.'

PC Calladine explains: 'When I was on the response [team], two of my colleagues were called out to Woolwich Common. They ended up with about 30 youths throwing bottles at them until other officers were called in. They were virtually lynched. They were trying to make it a no-go area for the police.'

Under the safer neighbourhood scheme, the officers are encouraged to 'take ownership' of their patch and the crime associated with it.

'We wanted officers who would be dedicated to their patch and would take it slightly personal when crimes were happening. The problems are now our problems and we deal with them,' says Sgt Openshaw.

But, he adds that a temporary knock-back has been that the officers who have moved into the team from response have not all been replaced, a situation which he hopes can be resolved in the near future.



CSO Donald Lopes speaks to a resident on the Barnfield Estate

Another feature which has given the team inroads into solving problems in the community, by working with other agencies, is the Changes in Common project, set up by Greenwich Council, local community organisations, police, health agencies and other service providers, to improve local services and make them more responsive to the local community.

A Changes in Common shop has been opened in Herbert Road, at the heart of the Woolwich Common neighbourhood, providing a place where residents can drop in and seek advice or tip-off the police about a problem hot-spot.

Woolwich Common 'neigh-

bourhood' area includes Herbert Road and the Barnfield and Woolwich Common Estates.

The area is made up of a diverse community; over a third of residents are between 16 and 24 years old and more than a third were born outside the UK.

Taking into account a number of factors such as educational attainment, the area qualified for Government funding as it features in the social deprivation indices.

Where members of the community may feel uncomfortable about going into a police station to report a crime, they seem to feel more at ease either speaking to the officers they know by name or going into the Changes

in Common shop.

The shop is funded through the Government's Neighbourhood Renewal project and was one of the first areas to pilot neighbourhood management. Around 500 people have walked through its doors seeking help over the last six months alone.

Ian Duke, assistant neighbourhood manager, explains how they have a residents' board, which includes those who actually live in the neighbourhood, and they have a direct say over community needs and where budgets are best spent.

Police officers are now set to move into the offices so that they are accessible to the community. They also have a jointly funded



Resident Colin Greenway has seen improvements since the Safer Neighbourhood Team were introduced

co-ordinator who operates a database carrying information from a cross-section of agencies and sources.

When a survey was carried out by Changes in Common in 2003, residents cited teenagers hanging around, vandalism and graffiti, abandoned cars, litter and rubbish and car crime as the most significant problems.

Sgt Openshaw admits: 'The police used to drive around in cars, they weren't accessible. People thought of us as 'the old Bill', not human beings, but that's changing with more of a presence on the streets.'

Changes in Common helped provide mountain bikes for the officers to get around the dark alleyways, a feature of many 1930s and 1960s council estates.

'They are excellent for visibility; the public come up and speak to us. At first it was a novelty, they would say "What's wrong, can't you afford a car" but now they stop and chat,' he says.

And those who do not always obey the law seem to be getting the message: 'We stopped a bloke having a drink in a no-drinking zone [drinking on the streets of the town has been banned due to anti-social behaviour], and he said to me "I've

heard about you buggers, people have told me to watch my back".'

Working with other agencies has been key to helping to cut the crime rate in the Woolwich Common community.

One example of working with other agencies, resulted in officers discovering a homegrown cannabis factory in a house in Woolwich.

The London Electricity Board found a surge in electricity usage at the house and immediately contacted the Safer Neighbourhood Team.

High usage can indicate that cannabis, needing a great deal of light to grow, is being cultivated and the tip-off resulted in officers netting a find of £100,000 worth of cannabis.

Van Bui, originally from North Vietnam, was sentenced to two years imprisonment for the crop which had been growing at his house in Woolwich.

Having a dedicated team who can deal with long-term problems and help plan to avoid them has also helped take some pressure off the response team, who may get call-outs to the same job, such as anti-social behaviour on fireworks night, several times.

Guy Fawkes night had creat-

ed havoc in 2003, when fires were lit in green wheelie bins, using industrial fireworks. Police officers themselves were injured when fireworks were thrown

from the maze of dark alleyways around the estates.

But the Safer Neighbourhood Team devised a strategy, firstly sending out 5,000 letters to residents on the Woolwich Common estate, asking parents to know where their children would be on Bonfire night and secondly shops were informed that they could not sell fireworks to under 18s. In fact the shops signed up to an agreement not to sell to under 21s.

'We also stepped up patrols,' says PC Calladine and Sgt Openshaw adds: 'It was an oasis of calm. A ghost town.'

PC Calladine describes how residents in one house were launching rockets at them in 2003, but in November last year offered them burgers, a peace offering perhaps.

There seems to be no question that the Safer Neighbourhood Team and Changes in Common seem to be creating positive changes in the community, the only question that remains is over the future funding for the projects.



Community Support Officers

CSO David Lennon, 31, is part of the team, he previously worked as a landscape gardener and voluntarily as a Special Constable, before moving to his current position.

He describes a typical day as part of the team: 'We have a briefing, we check what crimes have been recorded over night and the previous days and we will patrol that area to reassure the public, make sure that people know there is a presence.'

Safer Neighbourhoods is working really well. When I started a year ago, there was no jigsaw, nothing to fix all the different agencies

together. If there is a problem with kids wandering about on an estate, we get in contact with any necessary services and make sure the

problem is sorted out before its gets out of hand.'

It is such problems that concern many communities across the country. The other CSOs on the team include a diverse range of backgrounds as well as bi-lingual speakers.

Donald Lopes has been a CSO for two years, working for a year in the town centre before joining the team, with a background in catering.

'It has worked well. When CSOs were first brought into the town centre, before the neighbourhood teams were set up, crime was reduced by 40 per cent.'



Donald Lopes with Marie Packer and Leone Wilson