




Clean Sweep

Anti-social behaviour is a focus for the Government and for police forces. John Dean reports on a scheme in Durham to see how the police and council have managed to turn around the fortunes of a town suffering from problem behaviour.

 The rubbish piling up in the alleyways first alerted Durham Constabulary to the full extent of the problem in the back streets of New Shildon.

The discarded sofas and other garbage was a graphic symbol of a once-proud County Durham community which had fallen on hard times.

The cluster of century-old streets, which are part of the railway town of Shildon, had increasingly been taken over by a hard core of troublemakers who were making life a misery for residents.

Now, following a multi-agency operation, called Operation Axenic, which also involved organisations such as the local council, the pride is back in the area and the level of crime and disorder has dwindled.

The half dozen terraced streets with their interlinking back alleys were built for the working classes at the turn of the 19th Century when the town was home to a massive railway wagon works.

However, Shildon received a massive blow two decades ago when the works closed and in the

years that followed, New Shildon's streets began to reflect the town's change in fortunes.

A significant number of the houses in the streets went out of private ownership and were bought by private landlords, some who moved in tenants with a history of trouble, according to police.

Last Summer, it was clear that things had reached a low point. Sgt Steve Ball, who works on the beat team based in Shildon, said: 'The public were calling their councillors to make complaints about anti-social behaviour, drug dealing and rubbish dumping in the back alleys. There were things like sofas in back alleys. There was also a poor perception of the properties owned by private landlords, with boarded up windows.'

'The police incident log did not show problems but clearly there were problems there. Things were not being reported. There was an apathy about the police. People did not think we would do anything about it.'

The result was a meeting last summer when the police, borough council and other agencies sought to find out from local

people exactly what had been happening.

This promoted Operation Axenic with the police and council working together to tackle the situation.

Anti-social tenants

One of the key problems highlighted by local people was the type of person being moved in by the private landlords. Some of the tenants had been evicted from other areas, coming from all over the North-East, and had a background in criminal and anti-social behaviour. What infuriated some local people even more was that there were examples of tenants evicted from one side of a street only to find homes on the other.

Sedgefield Borough Council and the police worked with the private landlords to evict troublesome tenants and improve the behaviour of those who remained.

As the pressure grew, two particularly difficult tenants left, which contributed significantly towards better behaviour generally, said Sgt Ball.

Also, problematic young people were referred to experts who helped them address their behaviour.

Clean streets

Tackling the rubbish dumping was another key part of Axenic, a word which means 'to clean up germs'.

Sgt Ball and Richard Brown, borough council neighbourhood warden co-ordinator, said the American experience had shown that if areas were left to deteriorate, people lost pride and respect and the problems grew worse. Leaflet drops about rubbish dumping made the point to residents.

Sedgefield Borough Council called in its street clearance teams to remove the rubbish and environmental health enforcement officers issued warnings and fines against those who were persistently doing the dumping. Residents also received leaflets warning them against further dumping.

In addition, council community wardens and police officers mounted high visibility patrols, partly to reassure the residents and also to protect enforcement



Before: One of the alleys during the bad days



After: Clean alleyway these days

ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Picture credit: The Northern Echo

officers, one of whom was threatened by a tenant.

Sgt Ball said: 'It is fair to say that without a multi-agency response we would not have had the success which we have had. The idea of using the wardens alongside police officers was to show high visibility patrols by the extended police family.'

By talking to residents, the teams identified periods between 3pm and the early hours of the morning Thursday to Sunday when disorder was at its worst and targeted resources accordingly.

Increased confidence

Police and wardens also targeted adults supplying alcohol to youngsters, and with support from CID and Durham Police's Rural Policing Unit, cracked down on travelling criminals who were preying on people in the area.

Sgt Ball said: 'The approach paid dividends because it cut through the apathy and people started calling the police with information.'

'Local people knew that they had access to the police and the wardens and that the support was there for them. The key was establishing confidence and as a result, the calls increased as people started telling us what was happening and when.'

'The operation showed the community that we were not just paying lip service to them. There was a reassurance factor.'

Mr Brown said the clean-up of rubbish was an important part of the operation, saying: 'We knocked on every door telling people what we were doing and asking if they had anything which they wanted taking away.'

'I had been to Philadelphia where they had problems and it

was an amazing what an impact the clean up there had. It put pride back into the community, which is what we set out to do in New Shildon. People realised they had not been forgotten.'

Although the operation itself only ran between June and October last year, activities have continued to build on its success.

Keeping contact

Sgt Ball said: 'During the operation we made 28 arrests, including for drugs, public disorder, aggravated racial assault, the use of weapons and drunk and disorderly.'

'We have seen less anti-social behaviour in the area and we are still carrying out work. We know that if people do call us there is a problem so we make sure we ring people back so that they realise we are acting on their information.'

'Recently, after information from the community, we carried out an operation in New Shildon and seized heroin and made an arrest. When we do drugs raids we do a leaflet drop in the area afterwards, telling people what we have done and offering them phone numbers for health and support services. For us, that recent raid was the last piece of a jigsaw which started with information gathered during last Summer.'

Sgt Ball said that during the operation, the number of reported incidents in the wider area in Shildon went up 11.5 per cent, but it was only up 0.3 per cent in the New Shildon streets covered by Axenis.

He said: 'Although it went up a small bit in New Shildon, I put that down to people feeling confident enough to call us because they could see the results.'

The operation fitted in with Durham Police's wider Streetsafe campaign, which calls on the police to have a presence in the community, tackle the environmental and physical factors behind crime and disorder, provide an effective response and ensure effective communication with the public.

Sedgefield council has cited Axenis as an example of best practice and the approach is being tried out elsewhere in the borough,

Mr Brown said: 'The impact in New Shildon has been massive. It is a nice place to live again.'

Garry Huntington, the local mayor and a Liberal Democrat councillor on Sedgefield Borough Council, said the initiative had been effective.

He said the area's problems really started with the closure of the wagon works in the early 1980s when a lot of private houses were sold by men unable to keep up mortgage payments, allowing them to be snapped up by private landlords.

Councillor Huntington said some undesirable tenants moved in and changed the area's character.

He said: 'Fifteen-twenty years ago, it was a nice place to live and people had lived there for a lot of years but these other people infiltrated it and there were tremendous problems with anti-social behaviour, drug-taking, rubbish dumping and music played loud late at night. I cannot say enough to praise the marvellous work done during the operation.'

Back on track

The drive to eradicate the problems has been given extra impetus by the recent opening of a

£11m national museum a short distance from the streets. Locomotion: National Railway Museum, which has a number of locomotives from the National Railway Museum at York, stands on the site of the old works operated by 19th century railway engineering genius Timothy Hackworth, a few hundred metres from the New Shildon streets.

The museum's opening, and the thousands of visitors who have flocked to see it, has breathed fresh life into the town and Cllr Huntington says it is important that Shildon presents a positive image to tourists.

To that end, he said, anyone carrying out operations such as those in New Shildon must maintain the pressure, retaining a presence to continue to deter trouble-makers.

He said: 'It is alright carrying out these operations but you have to follow them up to ensure things do not slip back. You cannot afford to win the battle then let the enemy take a step back.'

Chf Insp Graham Hall, community justice manager for Durham Police, said: 'We had signal crimes like nuisance, graffiti and litter and anti-social behaviour and we and our partners responded to it. We delivered and the feedback from the community suggests that people appreciated that.'

Cllr Huntington believes that a significant start has been made towards resolving New Shildon's difficulties.

He said: 'I go to Neighbourhood Watch meetings and tenants meetings and there is a lot of optimism now.'

