

Split second

PC Rob Showell, a youth initiatives officer in Leicestershire Constabulary, writes about an initiative he set up with a colleague to combat the rising tide of youths wielding fake and live guns in the city.

Leicester Constabulary Armed Response Vehicles attend approximately 400 firearms incidents a year.

Research carried out by the force has showed the disturbing fact that nearly 45 per cent of these incidents fall into the category of 'weapon seen' and the majority of these incidents turn out to involve reports of youths in the street allegedly in possession of a firearm committing acts of anti-social behaviour.

Between April 2004 and March 2005 Leicestershire Constabulary, received 137 reported incidents of 'weapon seen' and in 106 of these cases, police officers were authorised to carry firearms.

We can all imagine the scenario:

A group of youths in the street, one of the group is pointing a gun at members of the public – the youth and his friends all know that the gun is not a real firearm, but they act in such a way that it causes concern or even fear. The police are contacted and the armed response vehicle attends the area to search for the individuals concerned. The police officers are armed for their own protection and that of the public. The armed officers find the youths and challenge them. Knowing that the gun is a toy, the youth does not follow the instructions of the armed officer, and inad-

vertently points it at the officer. With only a split second to decide, how should the officer react?

The force were concerned that one day a young person could end up being accidentally shot by a police officer for being in possession of a gun that is ultimately proven to be a fake. Sgt Andy Green, a firearms officer in the force and I began to look at partnership solutions to stem the growing trend amongst young people who seem to be fascinated with firearms and believe it is 'cool' or even 'necessary' to carry or be seen with a toy, imitation or replica firearm.

It was recognised at an early stage that for officers to attend all schools and address this issue with young people was operationally not feasible. It was therefore decided to obtain funding to produce an educational resource that could be developed in the form of a video or DVD with a supporting teacher pack. Having secured funding from The Leicester Partnership Against Crime & Disorder, the result was the 'Split Second' educational resource.

The pack is adaptable and hopefully engaging way for the police to tackle the issue of young people carrying imitation guns. Their behaviour often results in them engaging in anti-social behaviour, or other offensive weapons, which may trigger an armed response from the police. It is aimed at pupils in year groups six to 11 and beyond.

The resource pack contains a video or DVD and is designed for use by teachers, police officers, youth workers and other

professionals working with young people and is accompanied with a comprehensive teacher guide, notes and targeted at this age group, tackling this specific problem. Split Second links into schools' key stage 2, 3 and 4 work in:

- Personal, social and health education
- The citizenship curriculum

Also contained in the resource pack is the Crimestoppers 'Respect' campaign poster, which includes material looking at the issues around gang culture and firearms. It also includes Crimestoppers posters and stickers giving information on the law in relation to imitation firearms.

The Leicestershire and Rutland Criminal Justice Board, in conjunction with the High Sheriff of Leicestershire, recently commissioned a

company to produce a Law and Order module for the citizenship curriculum at Key Stage 4. The module is now being looked at nationally as a standard of good practice. Split Second is now an integral part of this module and will be available in every secondary school throughout Leicestershire from the Autumn term.

To date, no shots have been fired by Leicestershire officers outside the training range and we would like it to stay that way.

Anyone who would like further information can contact PC Showell at Central Area Community Safety Bureau, Mansfield House, 74 Belgrave Gate, Leicester LE1 3GG

● Look out for the Split Second stand at the 6th National ACPO Youth Justice Conference in Belfast 13th and 14th October 2005.

