

# On the right track

John Dean discovers that neighbourhood policing has a role to play even on the railways.

It's a beat that presents distinctive challenges because much of it is constantly on the move and often involves victims in situations from which they cannot easily escape.

Policing the railways requires a flexible operations style of policing which is why the news that crime is down in northern England is being seen as so encouraging by the officers responsible for the fall.

Statistics recently released by British Transport Police show that crime fell on the railways in the year to May by five per cent.

Most categories of crime came down in the North Eastern Area, which covers the National Rail system throughout the north east from Lincolnshire to the Scottish border, as well as the Sunderland extension of the Tyne and Wear Metro.

One of the main reasons for the decline is being seen as the use of Neighbourhood Policing Teams, which operate at stations and on trains using the main routes, not only tackling offenders and acting as a deterrent but also reassuring passengers.

BTP says the approach is one of the main reasons for a number of encouraging falls, including robbery down 36% violent crime down 3% and theft of passenger property down 17%. It is the fourth year in a row that crime has come down, even though passenger levels are at record levels. Detection rates went up to five per cent, hitting BTP's target.

BTP Superintendent Terry Nicholson said: "These figures are good news for rail passengers and the staff."

"These results are a tribute not only to hard work of our police officers and police staff, but to the commitment and investment of the rail industry in improving the safety and security of passengers and rail staff."

For BTP, an increasing focus has been on the kind of offences that disturb passengers, primarily anti-social behaviour, which is where the neighbourhood teams have proved invaluable.

Supt Nicholson said: "Britain's rail system is clearly a low crime environment. However, anti-social behaviour and low level disorder remain a important issue for BTP and the industry, and something which impacts directly on how people feel about travelling by rail, the working environment of staff and the fear of crime.

"We have put in dedicated Neighbourhood Policing Teams on key routes and stations; they are proving their worth by

reducing anti-social behaviour and crime. We intend to build upon this success, and introduce more police community support officers (PCSOs) across the North Eastern area to engage with rail passengers and staff in order to develop tailor-made solutions to tackle local issues. Through a programme designed to put more of our resources into front line policing, we are aiming to increase their numbers."

BTP has also reacted to concerns about knife crime, particularly weapons carried by groups of young people. The force's response has been Operation Shield, which uses mobile metal detection arches and scanners at stations across the rail network. Drugs dogs are often used as part of these operations, seen by BTP as one of the reasons the number of recorded drugs offences went up during the year: there were 303 reports, up 100, or 49.3 per cent.

The overall reduction in crime has been welcomed by the rail companies. CrossCountry Managing Director Andy Cooper said: "We are pleased to note the success reported by British Transport Police in further reducing rail crime, and it is encouraging that already safe and secure rail travel is becoming even more so. Maintaining excellent personal safety and security of our customers and staff remains our highest priority, and we shall continue to work closely with the police and our industry partners to improve it still further."

The BTP's Neighbourhood Policing initiative was introduced in the West Yorkshire area, where officers have been running it for the past 18 months.

Officers provide a high profile presence on station platforms and concourses including shopping areas, ride on trains and also liaise with regular officers from Home Office forces on a variety of crime prevention initiatives in the community.

The teams cover a large area, including Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield and Inspector Tracy Metcalf, Neighbourhood Policing Inspector for the North-East area, said: "Initially the idea was introduced in very localised areas but now it has been expanded across West Yorkshire.

"Rather like beat teams, we do have a regular community, including passengers, rail staff and

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tenants on stations. There is a core there. “What neighbourhood policing allows us to do is see where there are problems and respond to them.” Combating anti-social behaviour is a key target. Insp Metcalf said: “Whichever group of people you engage with, anti-social behaviour is one of the things they are worried about, whether it be in rural or urban areas. By providing a high-profile presence, we can hopefully prevent it happening. The feedback from the commuters and train crews has been positive,” The figures seem to support the assertion that it is working. Insp Metcalf points to the Micklefield area near Leeds, where in a two month period a

year ago there were 13 recorded incidents of anti-social behaviour. In the same period this year there were just four and one month had none at all.

To help tackle such problems, the BTP officers work with colleagues in Home Office forces as well. Insp Metcalf said: “We work very well with them. BTP acknowledges that it cannot operate in splendid isolation and we do ask each other to help out. They also tell us about things they are doing and we do the same. We want to avoid displacement so if they are doing something, say targeted at groups of youths in an area or the activities of beggars in a city centre, they tell us and we do the same in that same area. That way, hopefully, the groups have nowhere to go.”

“Although it can be harder to police a community which is on the move, and you feel more isolated on a train, we do have a travelling community and we are developing relationships with those people. People have also told us they feel safer with officers travelling on their train.”

One of the Leeds-based neighbourhood team is PC Paul Wood, who said: “It can be harder to develop a relationship with our community because much of it is travelling but we are achieving it. People did not see BTP officers much but now they are seeing us regularly. Our role is to be high-profile. We also regard the railway companies as part of that community and liaise with them.

“The reduced crime figures show that the approach is proving a success.”

That sense of progress is backed by Gemma Mitchell, one of the PCSOs who form part of the neighbourhood policing teams.

Also working out of Leeds, she said: “Although it can be harder to police a community which is on the move, and you feel more isolated on a train, we do have a travelling community and we are developing relationships with those people. People have also told us they feel safer with officers travelling on their train.”

Fellow PCSO Wayne Heslop has a slightly different role, working out in communities, liaising with local Home Office force officers, on schemes designed to prevent disorder by young people.

He runs schemes in which he is able to drum home the message about railway safety and the need to eradicate vandalism and trespassing along railway lines. PCSO Heslop said: “We are developing a relationship with these young people. I know who the troublemakers are, can put a name to a face, and I feel we are starting to earn their respect, which allows us to convey the message about trespassing on the railways.”



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