

Banned

Graffiti, thefts and noise - when groups of young people form intimidating gangs which hang around the streets, what can the police do to break it up? John Dean reports on a dispersal order being used to do exactly that in Durham



It is a tool which gives police officers new powers in the fight against antisocial behaviour. Dispersal orders allow officers to break up gatherings of people, often youngsters, to relieve the suffering of communities blighted by their actions. That has certainly been the case in the first such order in Darlington, part of the Durham Constabulary area.

the hands of drunken gangs which often included over 100 youngsters. Incidents included graffiti, stones thrown at windows and the theft of property from garages. However, according to community Inspector Brian Maudling, the three-month dispersal order has had a dramatic effect since it

force, there have been virtually no incidents.

The dispersal order covers the area of Nightingale Avenue, another road running off it, a path nearby and the site of the dilapidated school. The order gives police and community support officers the power to break up gatherings of more than two.



Inspector Maudling: dispersal orders have dramatic effect in Darlington

Police officers and council officers had become concerned at the rising number of complaints from Nightingale Avenue, an area which includes a row of shops and is close to the site of a former primary school, which has now been demolished. For many months, people in the area had suffered intimidation at

was introduced at the end of October this year. Between April and the introduction of the order, council wardens had been called out 131 times, and the police 210 times to deal with antisocial behaviour. The old school had been targeted 35 times by arsonists. Since the order came into

“They would stand around the shop entrances and even when they are doing nothing wrong, they are loud and boisterous.”

It also imposes a curfew on under-16s between 9pm and 8am every day. It was based on a similar order in Chester-le-Street, further north in the force area, brought under section 30 of the Anti-Social Behaviour Act, in March after people living in and around the Gibside estate complained about the behaviour of groups of young people. The main shopping precinct, in particular, was a magnet for under-age drinkers, who verbally abused staff and shoppers.

During the six months the order was in place, complaints dropped sharply. A total of 13 arrests were made, mainly for criminal damage and public order

Photography: Mike Gibb



Photography: Matt Deakin

offences, housing officials visited repeat offenders and education welfare officers conducted truancy sweeps.

The operation's success prompted enquiries from a number of other forces and a joint police and council action plan is in place to ensure the problem does not return. Insp Paul Anderson, based in Chester-le-Street,

said: "Not only was Gibside itself far more peaceful but we took steps to prevent the behaviour simply being displaced to other locations."

Insp Maudling visited Chester-le-Street when preparing the case for the Darlington order. He said: "We based our order on the best practice shown in Chester-le-Street. Before the order, if 20

or 30 young people gathered, you could look at a possible obstruction offence but what were you going to do, lock them all up? It tended to be down to our communication skills to move them on. The dispersal order was one of the last routes we felt we could take.

"A lot of people were dubious that it would work but the feedback from local



Photography: Matt Deakin

Dispersal orders: keeping antisocial behaviour out

councillors and people who ring in, or approach our local officers, is positive.”

Because problems occurred throughout the week, the order also runs throughout the week with extra officers on duty at weekends, with the result that the large gangs have vanished. Insp Maudling said the force was constantly monitoring surrounding areas to see if the trouble had been displaced; the evaluation is ongoing.

When the order was launched, leaflets were distributed to local people and schoolchildren explaining its terms. A key element was informing young people of activities for them in the area, answering one of their main complaints that they gathered on the streets because there was nothing to do; a local youth club had closed.

However, Insp Maudling said gaining feedback from the teenagers about the order had proved difficult because they had stopped gathering in the area. He said the next big decision for the police and council was whether or not to go

for an extension when the order runs out in January.

Insp Maudling said: “I am happy that it worked but we have got to be satisfied that the gangs will not come back.”

PC Sally Suleiman, a beat officer in the area, said: “The previous situation had been horrendous. The area lends itself to youths hanging around. There is a wide footpath, a roof over the shops to protect them from the wind and the rain and the shops are open for them to go for their bits and bobs. After that, they would chill out and use it as a socialising area. And because they all have mobile phones they were bringing friends from elsewhere.

“They would stand around the shop entrances and even when they are doing nothing wrong, they are loud and boisterous. We gave the dispersal order a lot of good publicity before we introduced it to make the children and the parents aware of what was about to happen and when it came in;

we policed it diligently on the ground and had a vehicle available if we needed to take young people home.

“The council also helped by gating off the school site, which had previously been open. The feedback from local people has been excellent. They can go to the shops without feeling threatened and there is no litter or graffiti. The shops like it as well: they lost younger customers but gained adult ones.

“Seven or eight of the young people moved near a supermarket in another area but the masses seem to have disappeared.”

One local woman, who asked not to be named, said: “The order has certainly helped. Before it came into force, you could have extremely large gangs. There were simply too many of them. It was just too much. Most of the kids were decent but there were some bad apples. Now, it is much quieter for the people living around the area.”

Photography: Matt Deakin



Forces using dispersal orders

- Orders are also used by Northumbria Police and Tynedale Council. From November 1, officers have been able to disperse groups of people who congregate in Hexham town centre, again using the Antisocial Behaviour Act.
- Although the area covered represents just 5 percent of the local police beat, a third of all anti-social behaviour offences occurred there. Of all recorded crime in Hexham, 25 percent happened within the area of the dispersal order. In the six months leading up to the order being introduced, there were 87 arrests, 35 for public order and violence against the person. Of these incidents, 77 percent involved men under 30.
- It is only the second time a dispersal order has been used by Northumbria Police: one introduced in Cramlington last year proved a success. Under the order officers can disperse groups of two or more people if they believe their presence has resulted, or is likely to result, in any members of the public being intimidated, harassed, alarmed or distressed. Police can also remove under-16s to their homes if they are in the area between 9pm and 6am. The order will be in place for six months and is under constant review and can be lifted at any time. Extra police patrols have been used in the town centre and officers have visited local schools and worked with the council to encourage youngsters into diversionary measures such as youth initiatives. Anyone refusing to comply with the order could face arrest, a fine of up to £2,500 and three months imprisonment.
- Cleveland Police is another force using dispersal orders. Inspector Chris Mead, of the neighbourhood policing team in Redcar, east Cleveland, said five had been introduced in the area.
- Among targets were young drinkers. Areas covered have included public parks. Insp Mead said that, before the orders, officers had limited powers when asking people to move on. He said that if they refused, that could create a difficult situation. The order gave police the powers to move on three or more people.