

Restorative Approaches in Neighbourhoods

Tackling anti-social behaviour and community cohesion, Wallerton, 2007

THE SITUATION

Wallerton is a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Bridgepool, a famous coastal resort. Parts of it are best described as 'run-down'. Neglected houses, B&B accommodation for the homeless and a few small shops line its main road. Older people are over-represented in the predominantly white population.

One of the local shops is an off licence. For many years it had been well managed by the owners without significant problems. However, in early 2007 an Asian family took over and the situation changed. Young people started buying large quantities of alcohol and distributing it to under-age children, many of whom were drawn into the area by the prospect of access to alcohol. The shop was staffed by a man in his early twenties who felt pressurised by people of similar age into selling them drink. Youths gathered outside the shop, consuming alcohol and behaving rowdily. They were aggressive, urinated in doorways and dumped 'empties' in gardens, causing annoyance and distress, particularly to older residents.

The family running the off licence received letters of complaint and verbal abuse from local people, which sometimes had racist undertones. Without family or cultural support networks and facing an increasingly antagonistic community, they became isolated and concerned about their safety. Takings at the shop dropped and the business became unprofitable.

Complaints to the police about anti-social behaviour escalated steeply and responding to calls consumed substantial amounts of officer time.

In the first four months of 2007

- ◆ More than 90 incidents near the shop came to police attention, 80% of these being rowdy behaviour
- ◆ The other incidents included assaults and criminal damage
- ◆ In the same period 13 young people were 'referred', which usually meant taking them home and, sometimes, informing the Youth Offending Team

THE SOLUTION

The police were concerned about what was happening and the potential of escalation. The Police Community Beat Manager had recently completed training on restorative practices and felt this approach had the potential to resolve several interlinked problems. Visits were made by him and Police Community Support Officers to discuss the issues with the main parties and explore the possibility of a restorative conference. Once they agreed to take

part, officers had further contact to prepare them for the meeting.

With the help of Community Support Officers, the Beat Manager decided to use restorative conferencing. He convened the meeting on the off licence forecourt at the time trouble most frequently occurred, and invited anyone interested to come and have their say, maximising participation of all parties.

Invitations were delivered to 200 nearby homes and posters advertising the event were fixed to lampposts.

Contact was made with the young people who were also encouraged to attend. Inviting so many people in conflict to come together undoubtedly carried some risks. However, these were assessed and control measures put in place by ensuring uniformed officers would be present at the meeting to reduce the risk of trouble.

Approximately 40 people attended the conference, reflecting strength of local feeling. As well as concerned residents and the shop owner, some of the young people were present and were challenged about their behaviour. Good restorative practice requires discussion to be carefully structured by the facilitator, who must maintain objectivity and neutrality throughout. It can be achieved by following a 'script' that guides participants through consideration of what happened, how people were affected and what outcomes they wanted to see. This should lead to an outcome agreement' and finally an opportunity for 'reintegration' when the parties can communicate informally.

- ◆ The off licence would stop selling cheap cider to named individuals and add its postcode to certain drinks so that they could be traced, discourage youths from hanging around the shop and install an extra camera outside
- ◆ The shopkeeper would buy into the community radio scheme, giving him support and linking him to other retailers and the police
- ◆ The police would increase their patrols and visibility, deploy a CCTV van and board up an empty house that was attracting drinkers and drug users
- ◆ The council would include the area in its planned street alcohol ban
- ◆ A review meeting to be held a month later

At the end of the process several of the complainants made a point of having a conciliatory chat with the family, thereby contributing to reintegration. The conference had an immediate and positive impact. The problematic behaviour reduced, the quality of life for local people improved and calls to the police

"This enabled the police to show that they are doing something positive"





became less frequent. The off licence owners feel less isolated so the restorative process has not only helped to defuse the situation but also strengthen community cohesion. The information they were able to give out created a positive impression of the 'extended police family' listening to the community and working together to solve problems.

Only six people came to the review meeting and all agreed that the problems had been largely resolved. Over the four months from May to August, fewer than 30 incidents came to police attention, less than one third of the previous total. The number of youth referrals dropped to just eight.

Incidents coming to police attention before and after the restorative conference

	Before (Jan-Apr)	After(May-Aug)
Rowdy behaviour	77	24
Assault	2	0
Suspicious activity	6	1
Police generated	5	1
Criminal damage	3	2
TOTAL	93	28

Clearly, the improvement was the result of actions by several stakeholders, but the restorative conference created the opportunity for these to be agreed. Importantly, it has led to sustained improvement, with calls for service to the police remaining relatively low over subsequent months.

What was the problem costing?

In financial terms, the notional cost to the police of problems linked to the off licence prior to the

conference has been calculated to have been the equivalent of £9,706 per year.

Other costs were incurred by the council that had to clear up mess and repair vandalism damage, and the off licence through lost business. But such monetary losses take no account of the social cost to local citizens who had to endure the ASB and to the family that experienced anxiety and isolation.

What did the intervention cost?

The restorative conference required preparation by the PCBM and PCSOs, who both attended two initial and review meetings. Their time has been costed at £814 using the same formula. To this must be added £40 for printing of invitation letters and posters. The total cost is therefore estimated at £854.

Estimated cost of police time spent on the restorative intervention

Organisation of conference	£505
Conference attendance	£246
Organisation/attendance at review meeting	£63
Materials (letters, posters)	£40
TOTAL	£854

What has been the net financial benefit?

- ◆ The number of anti-social incidents dropped 70% following the restorative conference
- ◆ Demand on police time fell proportionately, resulting in significant savings. The annualised cost of police time spent responding to problems linked to the off-licence since the conference is estimated to have dropped to £3,577
- ◆ This represents a saving of more than £6,100 per year

Estimated annual costs of police time spent dealing with ASB linked to the off licence

	Before restorative conference	After restorative conference
Handling telephone calls for service	£502	£154
Responding to incidents	£5,859	£1,758
Viewing CCTV / identifying offenders	£750	£226
Responding to complainants individually and at PACT meetings	£795	£240
Accompanying young people home	£1,800	£1,200
TOTAL	£9,706	£3,578

For further information:

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