

THE NOOK SCRAP YARD

A POP'S INITIATIVE

LANCASHIRE CONSTABULARY, KIRKHAM SECTION, ENGLAND, 1999

SUMMARY:

The Nook scrap yard at Staining had been the source of many problems for decades. The yard itself was located on a quite rural lane on the edge of the village of Staining. Most of the problems in the village could often be attributed to the kinds of people who used to visit the yard on a regular basis. I took the time to study what the specific problems at the yard were and to examine the problems that were caused in the village as a whole by patrons of the yard. This included complaints of stolen vehicles being traded at the yard; disputes in the yard and fights between customers and staff; out of hours entry to yard, thefts, damage and arson; complaints of noise and suspicious characters during hours of darkness; prolific offenders being stopped by officers in Village from far a field as Preston who all gave the Nook as the reason for them being in location; reports of unroadworthy vehicles and speeding on the Nook; and high crime rate on access roads to the Nook. Further analysis revealed criminals travelling to Staining; numerous reactive and proactive Policing plans targeting the Nook and its customers; public dissatisfaction with Police inability to deal with problem; and the location of the Nook providing a safe haven for criminal activity.

The Nook had always been targeted with a view to making arrests and detection's of crime. It had never been considered by Police officers to try and eliminate the problem completely and to form partnerships with the local community to strengthen PolicePublic relations and pool resources and ideas. Contact was made with a number of residents and the following course of action was decided:

- The formation of a neighbourhood watch scheme
- A detailed look at how the Nook effected the local environment
- Liaison with Environmental health
- Liaison with Health and Safety executives
- Liaison with Environment agency
- Community representative to write to local MP

The main impact that this initiative has had is a reduction of 38% in reported crime in the Village, comparing the first 5 months of 1998 with the first 5 months of 1999 and a massive 85% reduction for the same period for crime within a 200 meter radius of the yard. Additionally, links were forged with community members; the Nook was visited and condemned by Environment agency and Health and Safety with eventual closure of site due to being a danger to surrounding marshland and having inadequate facilities for customers.

SCANNING

I first started to examine or scan the problem of the Nook Scrap Yard when I first arrived as Rural Beat Officer for Staining in the summer of 1997. I quickly acquainted myself with the history of the yard and its problems from a Policing and Social point of view.

The scrap yard itself had come into existence in the early 1950's and stood on the site of an old farm *which* was located on the Blackpool Borough side of the boundary with Fylde, which skirts along the Nook to the west of Staining. The make up of the yard basically consisted of approximately 2 acres of land, which was surrounded by corrugated iron panels. Within the yard the soil was acrid brown and reeked of oil and upon it there were cars stacked on top of each other up to 6 high. There were no buildings in the yard but an old caravan, which served as an office for the employees to work from.

The land was owned by a group of associates, the main point of contact being a MR, Bagot from Rawcliffe Hall over Wyre. The land in turn was rented by Beck Brothers scrap metal dealers of Preston who employed a man called Gordon Marsden to manage the site. He in turn employed a number of casual laborers, some of whom were known criminals with motor crime offences to their name and associates who were active criminals.

I started to notice on my day to day patrolling that a large number of vehicles which appeared to be unroadworthy or unlicensed could be found parked near to the scrap yard or on occasions I would stop vehicles and report the drivers for motoring offences. I found that the drivers were all coming to visit the Nook for spare parts or to sell their vehicles. There always seemed to be a common factor that these people would be on the Police intelligence system and/or have criminal records.

I spent the first few months of my service at Staining performing high profile foot patrol up and down the Nook with a hope that would be offenders would be deterred from visiting the

Village, knowing that there was a local officer who was going to book them if they had anything wrong with their cars. I asked my colleagues to assist me with this task, which they did. This resulted in numerous offenders being reported for minor road traffic offences, some arrests for warrants being in force and one or two arrests for drugs possession. However, there was no real impact on crime in the area or from complaints from the public.

I looked deeper at the specific complaints that were coming in from the Village and to see how they linked to the Soap Yard. I found numerous complaints from people who had had vehicles stolen from around the district and who had traced them to the Yard. It always seemed that the yard staff would have misplaced the records for such transactions. Complaints were also received from the yard about disruptive customers, thefts of car parts damage and arson. The staff at the yard would at best be vague with the Police and on other occasions downright obstructive. The activity that used to go on during the hours of darkness was most disturbing to the local residents who would see groups of young males climbing into the yard. The Police would often be called only for the males to disappear over the back fence into darkness on Police arrival. This gave the impression to the locals that the Police were completely ineffective in dealing with the problem and that there was no use saying anything unless it affected them as individuals.

The problems that resulted from this lack of trust in the Police was that the criminals were given a free reign in the area. The largely complacent population of Staining would fall victim of opportunist crime; thefts from gardens, sheds and garages were common. All too often the thieves had it easy, doors were left unlocked, bikes left out and all the properties attacked lay on or close to the main access roads that lead to the Nook.

ANALYSIS

From the information that I had available to me it was obvious that there were a lot of problems

inherent to the Nook which were not being properly addressed by the Police. It was also apparent that a large amount of crime was being committed by traveling criminals from outside the Village and that this trend would continue as long as the Scrap Yard existed.

Of the Policing operations that had been called into existence over the years they had all targeted specific offences. The most recent of which was in April 1998 when detectives from the South Fylde Intelligence Unit asked me to speak to a resident on Lodge Court with a view to having a camera installed to film the entrance to the Nook. This was due to the fact that a prolific car crime offender called Eugene Ferguson had spoken to Detectives on a prison visit, telling them of how stolen cars were brought into the yard and stripped down for spare parts. This backed up my theory that these offenders would be my most likely suspects for the thefts from gardens, garages and sheds on the approach to the yard. I firmly believed that a person who would steal a car and drive it around in broad daylight would have no problem with stealing say a child's bicycle from a garden.

It was also clear that the yard was in such a spot as to be incredibly difficult to Police. The Nook after all is a lane, which leads to a cul-de-sac at Mere View Farm and is away from any main road. This gave me the belief that criminals felt safe whilst visiting the Nook, after all they would be thinking that the Police would be having much more pressing tasks in nearby Blackpool than the relative rural tranquility of Staining.

I also spoke at length with local residents in the Village about the Nook, on duty and whilst off duty at the local pub, after all I was a local resident myself residing in the Village Police House and therefore had an extra incentive to solve the problem. I found that most people wished that the scrap yard would just go away and that this would solve their problems. I began to consider this idea as I could see that people were fast loosing confidence in the Police's ability to deal with anything effectively.

RESPONSE

I knew that whatever response I made it would have to be something completely new and it would have to involve the local community. From this basis I decided to call in person at a number of addresses on Lodge Court to see if I could arrange a meeting with the residents. I had already met a number of the residents on a professional and social basis, one of who was a Mr., Curtis Dowman. He arranged a preliminary meeting late April 1998 and from that meeting it was decided to start a neighbourhood watch scheme.

A month later the neighbourhood watch scheme was launched and was well attended by the residents of the estate who all raised similar concerns over the yard. It transpired from this meeting that when Lodge Court had been built some two years earlier, that the builders had assured the residents that the yard was going to close. This had not happened and the house builders refused to take on the problem despite written requests from the house owners, their customers. It was also mentioned by one resident that the countryside surrounding the yard was suffering from years of oil and pollutants leaching into the water table. With being a countryside lover myself I promised that I would look closer at this to see if we could use this angle as a way to have the yard closed. From this point a discussion arose were numerous other statutory bodies were mentioned, such as Environmental health, Health and Safety, local government and the Environment Agency.

At the end of the meeting I urged the residents to take a joint responsibility with each other and the Police and to write letters and petitions to anyone they thought might be able to help. This course of action was agreed and I assured them that I would give the problem serious thought to see if I could find the perfect solution.

With all the information I had now gained from the various Police sources and from the community I applied the Problem Analysis Triangle to it, to see which element would be

best targeted. I realised straight away that all three areas had in fact been targeted. The yard had been raided, watched visited and policed pretty regularly to no real avail. The locals had been given crime prevention advice, urged to phone the police and reassured to the best of my ability. The offenders had been reported, arrested and intelligence gathered but still they came back time and time again to cause misery to the locals and put a strain on Police resources.

I realised that the only way to solve the problem was to remove one of the three points completely out of the equation. This led me back again to the yard which everyone had been calling out for years to shut. I decided to put my Wellington's on and stroll around the back of the yard to see for myself the pollution that was allegedly leaking out. I was quite shocked to see that the marsh land had a film of foul smelling oil on top of it which in turn was seeping into the main dyke which eventually feeds into Marton Mere, an area of Special Scientific interest only a mile further away.

I also looked at the surrounding fence to the yard. It was constructed of very old rusty corrugated iron, which was loose and swung dangerously in the wind. The cars in the yard were also dangerously piled and I remembered one of the staff telling me that a pile had once fallen over narrowly missing him.

All of these issues got me thinking that the best thing would be for me to telephone the other agencies mentioned earlier to see if they could do anything to at least stop the yard from polluting the environment. My first call was to a Mrs. Walmsley-Collins from the Health and Safety Executives Office in Preston. She assured me that she would come and look at the site and put some pressure on the yard to mend the fence and remove the piles of cars.

I also called Mr. Johnson from the Environment Agency also in Preston. I told him of the state of the watercourse and the apparent damage to the area caused by the yard. He was very interested and told me that they could come and take samples from the area and if there were pollutants then action could be taken.

Meanwhile Mrs. Walmsley-Collins visited the yard and told them of her requirements. To my disappointment, the yard followed her instructions and erected a proper wire fence and removed the large piles of cars.

When the environment agency visited, however, they made some very demanding requests such as the removal of the topsoil in the yard, concrete flooring and modern drainage. Within weeks of this announcement business at the yard wound down and the site was literally vacated over night. With some excitement I telephoned Mr. Bagot (the landowner) to see what had happened. He was very vague but would say that Beck Brothers were no longer suitable to occupy the site but wouldn't say further for legal reasons.

ASSESSMENT

Since the closure of the yard, which took place in September 1998, there have been tremendous improvements between the Police/Public relationships in the Village. Although it was not the action of the Police that finally eliminated the problem, the community still sees our actions as instrumental in achieving what they had given up as being impossible.

The most obvious statistical improvement has been to the crime figures from January to June 1998 compared to the same time period of 1999:

- Total reported crime in Staining Parish
65 in 1998 to 36 in 1999
- Reported crime within 200 metres of yard
15 in 1998 to 2 in 1999

Expressed as a percentage this shows a reduction of all crime throughout the Village as 45% and for a two hundred-meter radius of the yard a massive 85% reduction.

It is my belief and that of the residents that this is entirely contributed to the fact that the yard no longer exists and as a result of these offenders have no reason to visit Staining.

The only problem created by the closure of the yard was that for a short while we experienced a number of old vehicles that were unregistered and unlicensed being left abandoned. The neighbourhood watch coordinator however arranged for residents to patrol the lane and encouraged them to deter people from abandoning vehicles by directing would be offenders to another scrap yard in the Thornton area.

Public satisfaction?

The most important part of my evaluation has been to see how the public have felt about the closure of the yard and what difference the local residents have noticed with particular reference to the level of crime and disorder.

Immediately across the road from the Nook is a small development of houses called Lodge Court. Mr. Curtis Dowman from Lodge Court has surveyed the residents on an informal basis and has told me that everyone that he has spoken to has felt that their quality of life has improved greatly since the closure of the yard.

Another resident from the Nook, Mr. Glen Birkett, has passed comment on how quiet the lane now is and that he is more at ease with his children playing out than he was when the yard was open.

Mr. George Yinnakis from Staining road who walks his dog daily-down the Nook has also told me that he now feels much safer knowing that there is no longer 'undesirable people' hanging about and using foul language.

CONCLUSION

The most striking features of this plan are that it took very little traditional Police action to resolve what was a long standing Policing problem and that once the action was taken the problem was solved permanently and requires no further Police action.

This problem was also solved at minimum cost to the Constabulary, involving the thoughts and

actions of one Constable only. Most of the work and ideas on how to solve the problem came from the local residents with whom I met on a number of occasions which proved to me that we the Police don't always hold all the right ideas.

The other feature of this plan is that is completely unique, as I believe all "POP'S" plans are. The only common factor between this initiative and others is the application of SARA and in particular the use of the Problem Analysis Triangle which gave me the idea of tackling aspects of the problem other than the offender.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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