

**HILL TOP SPECIAL SCHOOL**  
A problem solving initiative

**Northumbria Police**

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## CRIMINAL DAMAGE TO HILLTOP SPECIAL SCHOOL

**Force: Northumbria Police**

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Hilltop special school is located in the Leam Lane estate in Gateshead , Tyne and Wear. The school caters for children with a wide range of special needs . The building lies within its own large ground and is surrounded by a large perimeter fence. The school is a single story building and contains lots of large glass windows.

The school had experienced sporadic problems of criminal damage and the odd burglary dating back to 1997, however in March 2002 matters came to a head and the problems at the school were brought to the attention of the community beat managers. The officers quickly identified that in order to bring about sustainable crime reduction at the school they would have to adopt a problem solving approach to the problem.

The officers immediately committed the problem to the Northumbria Police Problem Solving Database and using the S.A.R.A model set about combating the problem. They conducted an environmental scan of the building and grounds and identified the main causes of the problem. The perimeter fence was the main problem as it had been breached in a number of places allowing easy access. The surrounding footpath was overgrown with vegetation and offered good cover for anyone wishing to enter the school grounds.

The community beat managers quickly identified partners who could impact positively on the problem. The officers worked with the neighbourhood wardens, staff at the school and various departments of the local authority in order to achieve a sustainable solution to combating rising crime at the school.

Management information revealed that from November 1997 to March 2003 there was 41-intruder type incidents recorded at the school. Officers had had some success with the traditional enforcement approach where a plain-clothes operation had resulted in two arrests. This calmed down activity for a while but by the beginning of 2003 the incidence of crime was increasing. The solution lay in preventing access to the school grounds.

After consultation with the property management services of the council it was agreed to build a new 8-foot fence around the perimeter of the school. This fence was topped by anti-cacti rotating spurs which prevented the fence from being scaled. There has been no reported burglaries at the school since or any reports of damage.

This project showed that simple solutions are often the best and provide a good example of the benefits of working in partnership and following the problem-solving model.

Hill Top School is a school for children with special needs and is located within the Leam Lane estate in Gateshead, Tyne and Wear. The school caters for children from the ages of 11yrs to 16yrs that have a wide range of difficulties ranging from autism, through downs syndrome to moderate learning difficulties. Due to these problems the children can exhibit extreme behavioral problems.

The school is a single-storey building set in approximately four acres of land and is enclosed by a metal perimeter fence approximately six foot high. The school is of a 70s type construction with a flat roof with large windows all around the building. To the east of the school adjoining the school grounds there is a large green area which is used as a recreation site for people in the neighbourhood. The western and southern sides of the school are surrounded by the Springwell housing estate, which is a council estate, which has a reputation for high crime and disorder. Sandwiched between the perimeter fence and the housing estate is a footpath, which residents use to access their estate from the main Leam Lane road. Officers soon realized that many of the occupants whose houses bordered on to the footpath had created makeshift gates in their fences to allow easy access onto the footpath. For a map of the school and the adjoining area see appendix 1.

Problems at the school went back as far as 1997 and were characterized by acts of vandalism and damage not only to the building itself but also to teachers' property. Staff cars had been targeted in the car park resulting in not inconsiderable amounts of damage. In some instances the school had been burgled.

In addition to the obvious financial cost to the school the well being of the pupils and the morale of the staff was being affected by the increasing incidence of crime directed at the building. Many of the children suffer from emotional and behavioral problems and the disruption and distress caused by the acts of vandalism and burglary was beginning to cause real problems. On occasions pupils' property had been damaged or stolen which caused such distress often resulting in pupils becoming violent with their teachers. This had a pronounced affect on staff to the extent that some teachers were seriously thinking of leaving the school.

Although this problem had been of a sporadic nature over the years things came to a head in March 2002 and staff at the school brought the problem to the attention of PC 1421 Ged Foster and his colleague PC 843 Keith Flaherty.

### **THE APPLICATION OF PROBLEM SOLVING.**

PC Foster and Flaherty, fully adhered to the principles and effectiveness of problem orientated policing, and being the community beat managers for the Leam Lane estate, decided that they would take ownership of the problem at Hill Top School and use problem solving principles. They felt that by working with identified partners a sustainable solution could be found to halting the long term crime problems associated with the school.

The problem was registered immediately on the Northumbria Problem Solving Database, entering the problem on that section of the database that related to their area command -Gateshead East. (Appendix 2)

The officers stuck rigidly to the problem-solving methodology using the SARA model they realized that they would have to:

- **SCAN** – to identify exactly what the problem was.
- **ANALYSE**- to ascertain the **when, why, where** and **who** components of the problem.
- **RESPOND** –to actively combat the problem in partnership with other persons/agencies who could impact upon the problem and identify what practical measures each partner could take.
- **ASSESS**- to evaluate the success or otherwise of the problem. Identify what worked and what didn't work.

### **SCANNING THE PROBLEM**

The officers the examined the force management information systems such as crime recording and the streets and premises index which gave them access to the full details of all crimes committed at the school over a lengthy period. PC Foster carried out research into reported crime and incidents at the

school for the period November 1997 until March 2003. The research revealed that during this time period there concentrated spells of criminal activity at the school followed by lengthy periods of inactivity. However in total there were 41 intruder type incidents where the perimeter fence had been breached and school building attacked. Out of these 32 were crimed as criminal damage/burglary or arson offences.

In addition to this hard statistical data the officers liased on a regular basis with the local authority run neighbourhood wardens who patrolled large area in the east of Gateshead. Officers also consulted and received information relating to crimes from the head teacher at the school and other staff.

The most common crime committed at the school was criminal damage with the large school windows regularly being damaged by missiles thrown at them. These were stones picked up inside the school grounds are brought into the school grounds by the trespassers. The cost of repairing the damage to the school was £7,000 most of which was spent on repairs to the building in the first two months of 2003. The cost of such damage was borne by the school budget, and diverted scant financial resources from areas where they were needed.

Members of staff at the school were becoming increasingly worried as attacks on school property, and especially staff cars had started to occur during the daytime, during school hours. This indicated a growing boldness of those committing the crimes and highlighted to the officers the urgent need to deal with a rapidly deteriorating situation.

By interpreting statistical data the scanning phase highlighted that the majority of crime was being committed on an evening after 1900hrs and mostly at the weekends. Having established what the exact nature of the problem was PCs Foster and Flaherty, in conjunction with staff at the school moved on to analyzing the precise causes and features of the crime problems at the school.

## ANALYSING THE PROBLEM

The community beat managers decided to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the geography of the school and immediately set about doing an environmental scan of the building and the immediate surrounding area.

An examination of the school grounds immediately identified two weak points in the perimeter fence where access could and infact had been gained. A further examination of the fence revealed that there were two trees at the western edge, which served as natural ladders enabling intruders to climb over the fence, without having to damage the fence itself to gain entry. Officers also found that the security of the perimeter fence was also weakened due to the presence of a public footpath along its western edge. The head teacher at the school informed officers that attempts to repair the fence in the past had proven unsuccessful as the metal fence lats were quickly prized out of shape again by what appeared to be the use of a car jack –type instrument. This footpath was heavily overgrown with vegetation, which could provide good cover for anyone wishing to break the fence and enter the school grounds.

In conclusion the officers established that easy access to the school grounds, when the school was closed was the prime factor to be addressed when trying to achieve sustainable problem-orientated crime reduction.

As previously mentioned regular damage started to occur at the school during the first months of 2003. The school was covered by the external C.C.T.V. system, which was monitored by the council. Video footage from the system was shown to all uniform reliefs back at the station but this unfortunately met with a negative result. Stills were taken from the video footage and displayed on notice boards back at the station, but again no identifications were made.

PC Foster and Flaherty then decided to widen their net and took copies of the photos showing the perpetrators into local schools in the area but again the offenders were not identified. However one thing became clear the offenders all appeared very young, often appearing to be under 10 years old.

The officers identified three main causes of the problem at the school and these were all listed on the database as the areas, which needed to be addressed in order to target harden the premises and thereby hopefully reduce the level, of crime being committed at the school. The three areas were:

1. Insecure school grounds due to weak points in fencing and generally the weak design of the fencing allowing it to be easily damaged and breached.
2. Casual attitudes of local residents that the school grounds could be used as a general thoroughfare.
3. Attitudes of offenders, who from C.C.T.V. appeared to be youngsters of school age, that the school was simply a target form mindless vandalism and damage.

## RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM

PC Foster and Flaherty realized that there were a number of ways in which to approach the problems at Hill Top School. They also appreciated that for all their efforts to be successful they would have to identify which of the relevant partners were to be responsible for finding particular solutions to particular problems.

The partners in this problem solving initiative were easily identified. They were:

The police, including the community beat managers and all other uniformed personnel.

Members of staff at the school.

The Neighbourhood Wardens

Numerous departments of the Local Authority including:

Property Service Management

Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council Security Staff

Local Authority Tenancy Enforcement Officers

The Footpaths and Rights of Way Department.

The community beat managers took the lead in getting all the partners around the table in an attempt to seek a multi-agency solution to the growing problem of disorder at the school

## POLICE RESPONSE.

The CBMs drew up an operational order, which was aimed at trying to apprehend those responsible for committing crime at the school. The officers formulated an operation and named it **Operation Bugle**, and ran the operation in June 2002. The operation (See appendix 3) was compiled using the I.I.M.A.R.C. system of operational planning. The strategy used involved both officers deploying themselves within the school in plain clothes in parts of the school, which had been burgled in the preceding week. If any activity was observed the officers would then contact the control room who would then dispatch resources to the scene, whilst the officers themselves would arrest the intruders.

The operation was successful resulting in the arrest of two offenders who provided numerous other offences, which were referenced off as T.I.C. This had a marked effect on problems at the school with hardly an incident being reported for a six-month period after. In addition to this particular initiative the two community beat managers ensured that area command staff were well aware of the problems at the school and requested that any uncommitted patrol time by the area car was used to provide high-visibility around the school. In addition the officers themselves provided as much high-profile uniform presence as possible. PC Foster and PC Flaherty also attended the local primary schools in the area primarily to try and gain information regarding the offenders but also to drive home the seriousness of the crimes at Hilltop school and to warn those offenders or potential offenders who they were addressing of the consequences that faced them should they be caught. The officers also acted as a focal point for all offences at the school with all information gleaned by officers at the station to be given to them. The officers also insisted upon investigating and dealing with all reported crime relating to the school.

However, the resurgence of criminal activity at the school at the beginning of 2003 only reinforced the officers' attitudes that long-term sustainability could not be achieved solely by enforcement.

The solution to the problem lay more in the direction of crime prevention and in particular to increasing the security of the location by the means of making access to the site more difficult.

## TEACHING STAFF RESPONSE

Teachers at the school were encouraged to pass on any hard or soft intelligence to the police as soon as they received it in the hope that the numerous offenders could be identified and they were also encouraged to scan their C.C.T.V. videos when time permitted to see if they could identify persons who were trespassing in the grounds. However they were **always** asked to scan their C.C.T.V. when offences had occurred the previous evening so that police could immediately view the contents of the tape. The school caretaker was briefed to do systematic searches of the grounds everyday and to pick up and dispose of any debris which was found to be lying about and which could be used as missiles to damage school windows.

## NEIGHBOURHOOD WARDENS' RESPONSE

Gateshead Metropolitan Council employs three neighbourhood wardens who patrol the large council estates located in the east of Gateshead. The wardens wear a type of uniform but are clearly distinguishable from police officers, and operate on foot or by a specially liveried motor vehicle. All three wardens are employed by and serve under the direction of the local authority and have no powers of enforcement and act as a roving community based security service. All three wardens had established good working relationships with the community beat managers and had become good sources of intelligence and assistance.

Although these officers had no formal powers to deal with offending behavior their visible presence at the exterior of the school and in the immediate environs provided an additional layer of visible patrol and deterrent to offenders. The wardens also proved to be invaluable in highlighting any weaknesses in the perimeter fence and any area of the adjoining footpath which was overgrown and which offered good cover for offenders. During this period PCs Flaherty and Foster established formal intelligence links with the warden, which resulted in the officers providing the wardens with their external E-mail addresses. This resulted in the wardens providing weekly updates of problems on the Leam Lane and Springwell estates, which could then be addressed by the officers. The officers also established the precedent of attending the wardens steering group meetings, which were held every three months.

## LOCAL AUTHORITY RESPONSE

The local authority must be given a great deal of credit for the manner in which it responded to the growing incidence of criminality at the school. The authority placed permanent security on the site during the evenings and at weekends. Enhanced security cover was also provided over the school holidays.

The local authority's **Property Service Management Department** was given the task of re-positioning and re-designing the perimeter fence with the specific aim of making access to the grounds more difficult. The neighbourhood wardens had provided the department with statistical information concerning the number of occasions council security staff had had to attend the school to deal with alarm activations. The department's architects agreed that the perimeter fence was wholly inadequate in preventing illegal access to the school grounds.

The local housing department of the local authority is situated in the Springwell estate, which abuts on to the western perimeter of the school fence. At the start of 2003 this location had been chosen to house a new joint initiative between Gateshead Local Authority and Gateshead East Area Command. This initiative is known as **Operation Blizzard** and created a one-stop location for local residents who had any concerns with housing matters or police issues. The project has two police officers working in the same office as housing officials and tenancy enforcement officers. **Operation Blizzard** serves as a good example of the benefits of co-location and information sharing.

The tenancy enforcement officers inspected the makeshift gates in the fences of houses adjoining onto the footpath and arranged for these to be welded shut. The residents of the property were also reminded of their obligations under their tenancy agreements not to cause damage to council property.

Finally the **Footpaths and Rights of Way Department** of the local authority took positive action in relation to the footpath. Officers from the department had all the overgrown vegetation cleared, and had the footpath widened and resurfaced. This had practical advantages in that the removal of vegetation meant that possible trespassers could no longer hide themselves. The widening of the footpath enabled

it to be patrolled more easily by both the wardens and the police and also made it more attractive as a thoroughfare for residents and pedestrians, and thereby removed the temptation to take a short cut through the school grounds.

## **ASSESSMENT OF PROBLEM**

The officers assessed the situation at the school and all the above actions that were completed by them and their partners proved an unqualified success. There have been no reported crimes from intruders on the premises since March 2003; this was due initially due to the presence of local authority security on site. However, this has been complemented by the erection of a new perimeter fence in November 2003.

The new fence erected at a cost of over £150,000 was felt to be the most efficient way of dealing with the problem of escalating crime at the school. (See appendix 4). The fence as recommended by the **property services management** architect has successfully met the need of providing greater security to the school. The height of the new palisade fence is now 8 foot compared to the five foot of the previous one. Its bars are constructed in such a fashion as to give them a wave-like appearance, which makes it extremely difficult for them to be prised apart by using a car jack or a similar device. Anti-cacti rotating spurs are mounted on top of the fencing making it extremely difficult for anyone to climb over and gain access to the grounds. The success of the fence has been so great that security is no longer needed at the site.

Although the problem is approaching its six-month review date the community beat managers are confident that the large-scale sporadic crime problems of the school are a thing of the past, brought about principally by increasing the security of the perimeter fence.

## **REASONS FOR SUCCESS**

The whole approach to the problem at the school provided a good example of how problem orientated policing, using a systematic approach, could achieve sustainable success.

PC Foster and Flaherty identified suitable partners at an early stage and identified what each could offer in terms of making positive inroads to the security problems at the school.

The officers established an excellent working relationship with the neighbourhood wardens and fully utilized this additional resource, which was at their disposal. The two-way flow of information between police and the wardens enabled them to fill in the patrol gaps when the other was not on duty. The officers similarly built up an excellent working relationship with staff at the Hill Top School and fostered an atmosphere where cooperation flourished.

In addition to adopting a long-term problem solving approach the officers also adopted a series of short-term measures to run along side. This was evidenced by the success of operation bugle and their use of increased coordinated high profile patrols, by themselves, other police officers and the wardens. The officers also recommended that the local authority supply on site security until the new perimeter fence was erected.

PC Foster organized a large meeting bringing all the interested parties around the table to discuss the crime reduction strategy for the school. This proved of vital importance and provided the local authority with all the information it needed to combat the problem. It also enabled the staff at school, in concert with the police to impress upon the local authority how big a problem the situation had become, and how quickly a remedy needed to be found.

The initiative also helped to increase public confidence in the police as it demonstrated police resolve to successfully solve a particular problem.

The success in crime reduction at Hilltop school serves as a good example of how effective a problem solving approach can be in finding a sustainable solution to a long-standing problem. PCs Foster and Flaherty applied a problem orientated policing approach to the situation at the school with the result that their simple recommendations provided lasting results.

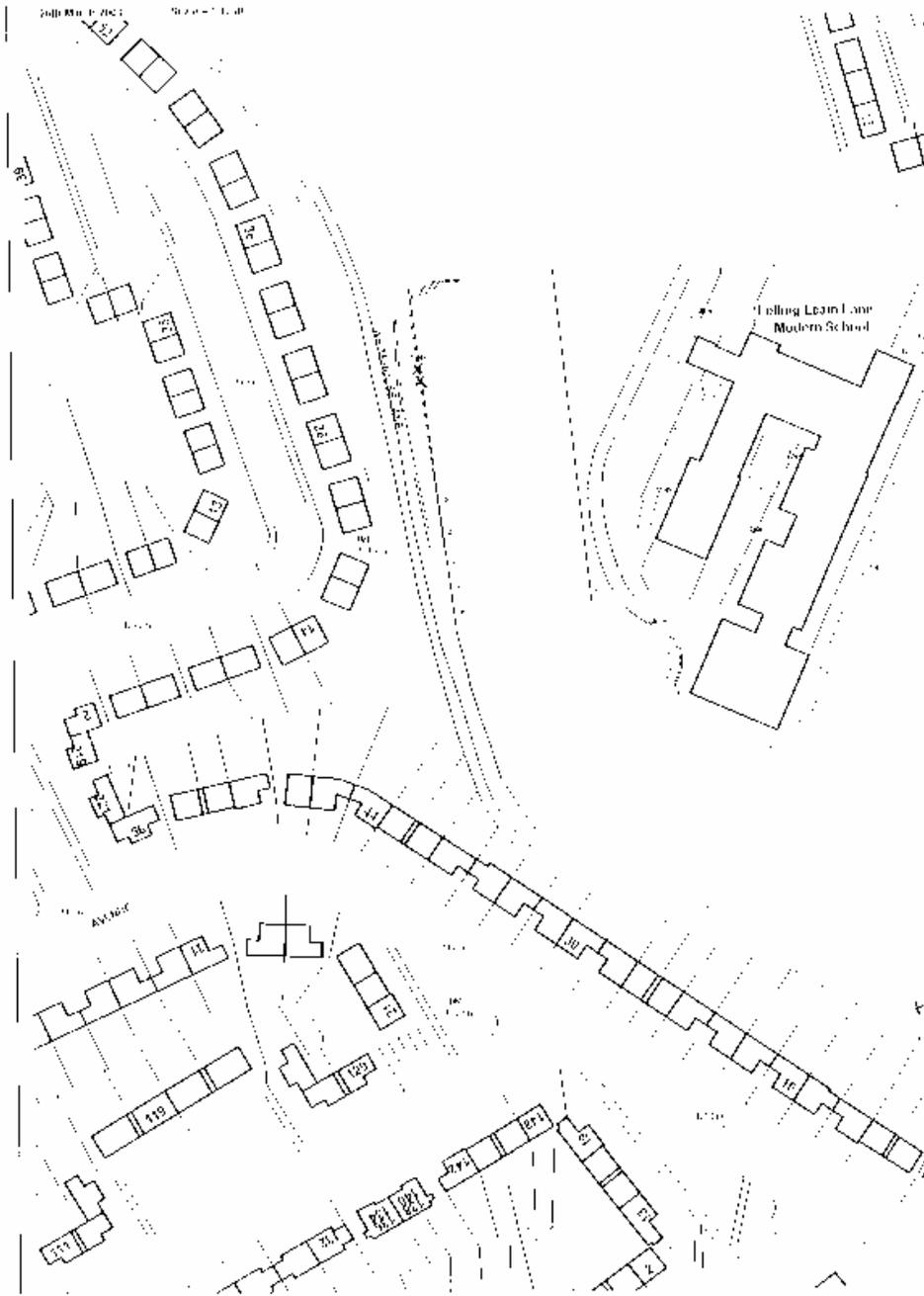
## Appendices

1. Map of Hill-Top Special School

2. Problem solving form

3. Operation Bugle

4. Photograph of perimeter fence



## PROBLEM SOLVING FORM

### SCANNING \*Section Complete\*

This is the process for identifying perceived problems by asking - what, where when, how and who ?

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**What is the location of the problem ?** Area Command,J3 Beat Code:J2K3 Sector:J2  
Other:  
Hilltop School

**Location (One Liner)** Westhill Farm Lane Estate  
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**What alerted you to the perceived problem ?** Your own/officers' background knowledge  
Community Intelligence (public officers forums - groups - individuals etc.)

**What is the type of problem ?** Criminal Damage

**Short Description** Criminal damage to school building windows  
Burglaries where entry is gained simply to cause damage inside the building & to properly removed from the building  
Arson in wheelie bins & property removed from building by means of burglary  
Criminal damage to staff cars in car park to school.

These incidents are occurring mainly at weekends around 1900hrs onwards & from CCTV evidence, appear to be committed by groups of male youths. More recently the damage to cars has occurred during school hours whilst staff were on sight.

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### Detailed Description of Problem

The offences outlined above are the problem. As well as the financial loss to the school the disruption it causes in the school day is made more acute as Hilltop School is a Special School. Many of the pupils suffer from disorders which severely effect their state of mind when their daily routines are disrupted. In some cases their work has been removed from the classroom & destroyed. When this occurs Teachers have real difficulty in controlling the pupil's reactions, which can often be violent in nature. Video recordings from CCTV have been seized, showing potential offenders but as yet no persons have been identified.

OPERATION  
BUGLE

## INFORMATION

Hill Top school, Wealerok, Leam Lane estate, Gateshead, has been subject to three offences of burglary within the last three weeks. These offences have occurred over each of the last three consecutive weekends. The offenders have gained entry from the same side of the building on each occasion.

## INTENTION

To carry out covert observations from within the school, if any offences should occur, arrest offenders and deal with appropriately.

## METHOD

Two plain clothes officers are to be deployed within the school in order to conduct the observations. The officers will be deployed within the area of the building which has been attacked over the last three weeks. Should any activity be observed the officers will inform the control room, who will in turn inform the area car covering that beat, in order for the officers to deploy themselves should any offenders attempt to flee from the scene. Officers within the premises will allow the offender/s to gain full entry to the building before identifying themselves and effecting arrests. (The head teacher of the school is aware of this method.)

## ADMINISTRATION

*CARETAKER CONTACT 4387098*

Should arrests be made, all arrested persons should be taken to JJ command unit. The OIC's for all arrested persons will be the officers who effect the arrests. Arrangements to secure the premises, should any damage occur, should be made through the local authority. The property should be fully secured when officers leave the premises. Crime details to be faxed to CRB on completion of the investigation.

## COMMUNICATIONS

Channel 47 is to be used. 2 x mobile phones are to be used. Officers deployed within the premises are to have access to a mobile phone and the area car will also have access to a mobile phone. These will be provided by the community beat managers.

## RISK ASSESSMENT

All officers involved in this operation should carry protective equipment e.g. kwikcuffs, batons and CS spray. Protective vests should be worn at the discretion of the officers. However officers deployed within the premises are advised to wear such. The building will be in darkness during the course of the operation, officers deployed within the building should take care when walking around due to furniture and other items that could cause injury due to the poor visibility. The school is surrounded by a metal spiked perimeter fence, officers are advised not to climb over these under any circumstances as they risk potential serious injury. There are certain areas of the fence where it is possible to gain access ( see attached map )

