

'Communication is The Key'

Force: Northumbria

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(Percy Main C.B.M. & Extended School Officer)

Summary

The 'jewel in the crown' of Tyne and Wear's transport infrastructure is the Metro System. With over thirty stations covering every major residential area it is essential to millions, servicing business, leisure and tourism. The Metro is privately run by the Nexus organisation with subsidies from local government.

The system is run with minimal staff, the station platforms are not manned with entry to the trams relying on the honesty of passengers. Metro carriages are irregularly patrolled by 'revenue teams' generally made up from surplus drivers.

Stations are mainly located in high-density residential areas and have inevitably attracted local youths onto the system, on the platforms and in the vicinity. Typical reports to the police are of gangs of youths abusing alcohol/drugs and engaging in acts of anti-social behaviour. This has an obvious negative effect on law-abiding passengers and the life quality of residents living in the close proximity of stations. Metro stations forcewide are recognised as crime hotspots with regular incidents ranging from assault and robbery through less serious offences of drunken 'yobbish' behaviour and graffiti damage.

Many solutions to the problems had been tried with varying degrees of success. These included classical music pumped onto station platforms, painting walls pink and permanent conductors on parts of the system.

Percy Main metro station was one such station that experienced all of the above crime and disorder issues until a long-term solution was offered by the local Community Beat Manager. With the full support of Local Authority, Nexus, Education Authority and the Community Forum a strategy which culminated in the placing of simple warning signs resulted in the drastic lowering of crime and disorder levels.

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Percy Main is a small village in North Tyneside sitting East to West between the Meadowell housing estate of North Shields and Wallsend. The village itself provides no employment and, apart from the church and two small shops, it is made up of privately owned and local authority housing. The village is split in two, north to south, by the main road which separates the two types of housing. At the northern tip lies the Metro station which carries trams between Newcastle and the coast. Persons using the Nexus station are mainly residents and workers commuting to employment in the Chirton Industrial and Tyne Tunnel Trading estates.

The majority of Metro stations on the Nexus system typically suffer anti-social problems caused by youths and young adults congregating, often in the evenings, in the vicinity or on the platforms. These youths usually group together drinking alcohol and display the associated loud behaviour that accompanies alcohol affected people. As some of the 'offenders' are over eighteen years of age and they group on public streets surrounding the station their mere presence, although intimidating, has not in the past been positively addressed or dealt with by police as a particular offence.

Police officers who asked groups to 'move on' in Percy Main were faced with 'where to', 'why', and 'what offences are we committing where we are that we won't be committing elsewhere'. Groups that were 'successfully' moved on invariably drifted back as soon as the police officers left.

In addition to obvious public order issues, an excessive amount of criminal damage was evident in this area. The tone of the whole village was set by large displays of graffiti damage

accompanied by piles of broken cider and 'alcopop' bottles thus greatly reducing the quality of life of residents and giving a bad impression to travellers passing through. More seriously, projectiles thrown at moving trams have broken windows injuring passengers and causing further damage on a regular basis.

Inevitably one must ask 'why did the large groups of youths congregate at Percy Main station and the surrounding streets?' The problems associated with these groups gathering in the vicinity of the station were quickly identified as an evening/night-time phenomenon. During the day, even at weekends, and through school holidays, stations were used by passengers only and surrounding streets were clear. Wet and windy evenings created just as many, if not more, calls to the police than spells of good weather.

This gives rise to two main questions.

1. At night and on dark evenings what was it that made the station different to other parts of the village?
2. Why was it that poor weather, often described as 'a police officers' best friend', did little or nothing to reduce the large numbers of calls highlighting/reporting the problem.

The answer was simply that the groups were congregating in one of the only constantly-lit locations that was sheltered from the elements.

Taking a broader look at the problem a list of contributory factors was identified:

1. the position and design of the Metro station and lit/sheltered pedestrian tunnels leading to it.
2. the complete lack of any provision of youth leisure facilities that were affordable:

3. tolerance and support of drinking and disorder caused by youths whose parents lived in the surrounding local authority housing.

Initially a short-term response was made to the problem as identified above. The group of Community Beat Managers responsible for the area patrolled in numbers in high visibility clothing at peak call times. The area command disorder patrols were informed of the 'hotspot' status of the area and prioritised their mobile patrols accordingly. A longer term solution was required however and a list of likely partners was drawn up. Like all issues of youth crime and disorder an approach was required that would provide a permanent solution in this area without merely displacing the problem elsewhere. The list of partners included:

1. Nexus - the transport authority owning the Metro system,
2. The Local Authority whose estate housed both the 'injured parties' and 'offenders',
3. The Education Authority represented by the local high school where the majority of 'offenders' were educated,
4. The local church which, as a focal point in the village, hosted the monthly meetings of the Community Residents' Forum.

The action proposed by the police was to ensure that youths gathering in the vicinity of the station would be moved to another location which would not cause annoyance or rises of crime and that the youths would not simply drift back in the future. The police would use common law legislation viz 'Public Nuisance'. This legislation is flexible and suitably open to interpretation as - 'a person is guilty of being a public nuisance if on a specific date at a specific place they caused nuisance to the public by any act'. Officers were encouraged to use this legislation after reading a leading judge of the 20th century's comments on the offence :

“I prefer to look to the reason of the thing and to say that a public nuisance is a nuisance which is so widespread in its range or so indiscriminate in its effect that it would not be reasonable to expect one person to take proceedings on his own responsibility to put a stop to it, but that it should be taken on the responsibility of the community at large”.

A particular example that interested the officers was one where youths were merely hanging around a bus stop. If they were gathering elsewhere this would not have been an offence but, because bona fide users of this service ie. members of the general public, felt intimidated or even prevented from using the bus shelter, the offence was obvious. The police, in pursuing this group, were acting, as the judge put it, - ‘for the community at large’.

The most effective way of applying the legislation to the problem was sought by making use of all the community partners. It was seen as important that prior notice of any action should be given. Any attempt to simply enforce the legislation without doing so would inevitably be counterproductive leading to simply arresting youths, who for years past had just been ‘moved on’. This more constructive approach was therefore adopted.

In the first instance the same Community Beat Officer who had developed special links with the high school, Norham Community College, undertook an initiative by way of the extended school model. This ground-breaking model, trialled at two schools including Norham, involved the police working as valued partners alongside social workers, health professionals and mentors. The multi-agency approach inside the school was designed to improve the life choices of students, increase self-esteem and address community issues positively within the catchment area. As part of the regular interactive sessions the officer had with all pupils and staff in the school he was able to make the youngsters aware of the concerns of local residents and Nexus passengers caused by the large gatherings in the location. By this means the police were taking the important step of giving advance notice that the situation would no longer be tolerated and that groups loitering in this area would face arrest for being a public nuisance. The legislation was fully explained emphasizing the reason why the police were intending to arrest youths for simply

'hanging around the area'. It was at this point, and by this means, that the young people themselves became partners in the long term solution of the problem.

The group sessions in school involved healthy debate as opposed to the police simply telling the children they were guilty and accepting no mitigation.

The pupils explained that, just as the police had guessed, the reason why they gathered at this location was because it was the only place which was sheltered and lit. The alternative which the council had built for them on a nearby field where they were expected to go had neither of these advantages. Furthermore, as the youngsters had not been consulted or included as partners in any decisions made on their behalf, a basketball court had also been built for them in the same location. The police officer taking the classes got an interesting response when he queried if the children had they been asked if they wanted a basketball court and how many of them played the game. Out of over eight hundred children just three said they might play. At this point the officer became convinced that if the children were a main part of the problem they must be a full partner in any solution for it to have any lasting effect.

Now that the youths had been made aware of the problems they were causing the police worked with Nexus and the local authority who had four large signs made which were sited all around the Metro stations displaying the message 'PERSONS LOITERING IN THIS AREA MAY FACE PROSECUTION FOR CAUSING A PUBLIC NUISANCE'. The youths had been educated as to the problems caused and the likely police response, the signs ensured no-one would be able to 'forget' or plead ignorance.



It was decided that any transgression of the signposted behaviour would also be dealt with by signing up offenders on anti-social behaviour contracts. These contracts were now administered with the combined force of all three partners - the school, the local authority and police all working together. Refusal to adhere to the behaviour contracts would result in the council, with the support of the police, initiating eviction proceedings against parents of anti-social children.



The Secretary of the Percy Main Residents' Forum was consulted at every stage of the implementation of the problem-solving initiative and they in turn informed residents that the police, in close consultation with their partners, were addressing the problem.

The sustainability of the solution was next to be addressed by consultation between the the new-found partners of the children themselves, the local authority and the Residents' Forum and so the problem is potentially solved.

The unaddressed factor remaining is that, if the youths are to remain away from the station, an alternative has to found. The Forum agreed with the police that the youth of the village must have there own space where they would not be continually 'moved on' . It was further agreed by all that the basketball court was the ideal site as it was not on any through route and had no houses overlooking it. With the encouragement of the police the Forum wrote a letter to the local

authority detailing their approval for the youths to be given ownership of this area. The police Local Authority Liaison Officer was consulted who offered support and advice.

Consideration is currently being given as to how the children of the school may begin a process of consultation with the local authority and the police to have a Youth Shelter built which would be both lit and protected from wind and rain. Support from the local authority ensures that, with all agencies involved, this modestly-costed solution, will be completed in the financial year 2004/2005. Unusually this may result in a situation where everyone is happy.



It was the intention of the police to make an example of persons breaching the education programme despite the clearly displayed signs. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, due to the

success of this collaborative approach, the youths no longer gather at the station and are awaiting the construction of their own space.

In summary a community problem had existed for several years. It was identified from crime pattern analysis as a hotspot of regular calls. The problem was confirmed by the Community Beat Officer through attending local 'surgeries' within the community. Solving the problem was addressed by educating the offenders as to the offences being committed then including the young people in the multi-agency problem-solving partnership. In hindsight, the latter was certainly the most important aspect.

Latest Developments (22nd March 2004)

In the meanwhile the young people have sought the approval of the police in removing their social activities to Linear Park, a nearby public open space, and this has met with general approval as an interim measure.