Catching Them Young
How a supported housing scheme worked with their local school to stop children’s harassment of disabled residents

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RaceActionNet
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1. Context
2. Case study background
3. Responding to the harassment
4. Reflections of the School Co-ordinator
5. CIC’s recommendations for others in similar circumstances

1. Context

‘Thrill seekers’ is one of the typologies of offenders used by criminal justice practitioners to describe those who are drawn to offending behaviour because of the thrill or ‘buzz’ it gives them. Most often these are children and adolescents – often they and their families are known to the police and other agencies – who are influenced by a wider peer group and will ‘tag along’, often getting drawn into violence without any regard for the victim. Effective action to deal with these young offenders at an early stage is important not only to protect victims but also because thrill seekers’ bigoted attitudes could become entrenched and lead towards more serious premeditated and targeted hate crimes.

People with mental health problems or learning disabilities may be particularly vulnerable to attack. The recent case of Fiona Pilkington and her disabled daughter, who had a mental age of 4, shows the grave consequences of failing to treat seriously harassment by young troublemakers. The inquest into their deaths in September 2009 found that the catalogue of errors by the police, borough council and county council social workers had ‘contributed’ to the decision by Ms Pilkington to kill herself and her daughter because they were unable to bear being tormented by local youths. The assistant deputy coroner expressed particular concern that the authorities had failed to gather and record information about the harassment that had been reported over a 10 year period.
In the following case study a scheme for vulnerable adults with complex physical and learning disabilities in a deprived area of Leeds had been plagued by the anti-social and criminal behaviour of local school children, usually of primary school age. Their harassment had taken the form of vandalism including arson attacks and rubbish dumping, theft of items from the gardens, defacements of fences, damage to staff cars, and other physical attacks on the property.

2. Case study background

Community Integrated Care (CIC) is a national social care charity supporting thousands of people to live full and happy lives within their communities. One of CIC’s main service sectors is ‘Independent Living’, where CIC supports individuals with learning difficulties and/or mental health concerns to live independently. One such service is Ferncliffe Road, a registered service in a deprived area of Leeds, assisting four vulnerable adults, all of whom have complex physical and learning disabilities.

Lynda Whitehead, a new manager at the Ferncliffe Road scheme was appointed in July 2006. As a local to the area she began to build stronger links with the Community Police, inviting them into the service on a regular basis to chat to the residents and staff. However in December 2008 there was a sudden outbreak of violence when children set fire to the bushes at the front of the property, directly next to the service's minibus van. The fire brigade immediately extinguished it but this attack could have had frightening consequences for the residents and staff.

3. Responding to the harassment

The local school

The manager recognised that an immediate intervention was needed to protect everyone at the service. She contacted the local primary school and was referred to the School Co-
ordinator, Lynn Dove, who acted as a mentor to the school’s most vulnerable and challenging children.

Working with the School Co-ordinator, the manager of the Ferncliffe Road scheme was able to identify the children involved. The school was shocked to hear about the behaviour and immediately committed to help resolve the situation.

A full school assembly was called, and the Head talked to the children about the importance of respecting fellow citizens, understanding diversity in society and the significance of positively contributing to the community.

All the children identified as trouble makers belonged to the same class, and so the School Co-ordinator spoke to this group directly, encouraging anyone involved to take responsibility for their actions and admit their involvement. This prompted six children to come forward. Their immediate admission was a genuine step forward and it was felt that as a result, a positive change could be brought about for the children, as well as the residents.

Residents meet the young troublemakers

After liaising with the School Co-ordinator on how best to address the situation, an innovative solution was reached; the children were invited to spend an afternoon at the Ferncliffe Road scheme to meet the residents, get to know them and learn more about vulnerable people in society. It was explained to the children what a negative and disruptive effect their behaviour was having on the residents and the potential ramifications of their actions, in particular, the potential for them to end up with criminal records.

The outcome of the intervention has been overwhelmingly positive. At the meeting the underlying reasons for the children's behaviour were explored and it was realised that their actions were born out of naivety and ignorance. The tenants were being targeted because they were seen as ‘different’. The children were very upset when they realised the effects of their behaviour and said they would stop immediately. They also said they would not let other children do it and would tell them that "the people that live there are nice" and "did not deserve it."
After the meeting

Since this first meeting there have been no further instances of anti-social behaviour at all, and as a consequence, a sense of calm has been restored to the service. The residents are living more peacefully and feel safer in their home, regaining a better quality of life as a result. The children have invited the staff and services users to their summer play and they have contributed towards building a sensory garden for the residents. The community has become more aware of the people who live around them and as word has spread, people have been stopping to say hello to the service users and staff, so they feel supported and less isolated.

There have clearly been big changes since the meeting. The approach taken in fostering a relationship with the local school and parents has created a sense of collective responsibility so that those responsible have been educated, instead of just admonished. Conscious that they were dealing with young children of primary school age, CIC recognised the damaging effect it could have on them if we were to invoke legal action, resulting in criminal records with the police at such a young age. That would have been counterproductive and contributed to a vicious circle of bad behaviour and recrimination. Instead the children learnt a lesson about why what they were doing was wrong, something is far more productive and long lasting.

The parents are now aware that their children do have the capacity to engage in anti-social behaviour and so are now more likely to notice any further issues and address them before they reach adolescence. The children and the school are also involved in a wider programme of promoting responsibility and a culture of respect, which it is hoped will become a generational legacy for the area. Through collaborative working with the local school, parents and to some extent the community police, a positive and constructive outcome for everyone involved has been achieved.

4. Reflections of the School Co-ordinator

Lynn Dove, School Co-ordinator, writes:

"When I was first contacted by Lynda Whitehead manager at CIC’s Ferncliffe Road scheme, I was appalled to hear about the problems that the staff and residents were encountering. Lynda and I were in agreement that we needed to work together to bring
an end to this behaviour, and we were united in our view that this aim had to be achieved through education, rather than just punishment. The outcome to this approach has been rewarding and inspiring. The anti-social behaviour has ceased completely and both the children and residents have benefited from the approach taken. By working positively with Lynda, we have achieved a better sense of community spirit and have taught these children values that will hopefully stay with them for the rest of their lives."

5. CIC’s recommendations for others in similar circumstances

“Take a stand. If you, your residents, tenants, service, or community are experiencing anti-social behaviour, don’t suffer in silence. Often people are scared of the repercussions of reporting incidents to the Police, but the Police are only one option for challenging anti-social behaviour. When dealing with younger children, and adolescents, it is schools and parents that can have the biggest impact.

Consider more positive methods of intervention. If possible, look to education as a way of enabling perpetrators to understand the consequences of their behaviour and hopefully, as in our case, this knowledge will bring with it change.

Think positively and don’t just expect your plight to go unheard. In our case, the parents of the children involved were shocked at the behaviour. As soon as they were informed, they supported us and took immediate action, even suggesting the children carry out ‘community service’ such as household chores (although whilst we appreciated the offer, we felt the children’s apology was sufficient!)

If you can employ staff from the local area, do so. It strengthens the community and makes services part of it. Lynda Whitehead is local to the community and her knowledge and understanding of the needs and issues of the area gave her the insight and contacts to resolve the situation in a positive way.

Above all when dealing with anti-social behaviour, remember that children can do things that hurt other people because they do not realise the impact of their actions, because of peer pressure, or because of poor parenting. Take the time to educate them and let them express
their feelings before taking police action if possible. Changing someone’s mind as well as their behaviour is far more productive and long lasting for the whole community.”

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