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Operation Moonbeam – North Ayrshire

Practice Exemplar 16/07/2021

Introduction

Operation Moonbeam is a nationwide programme that is the annual response to the delivery of community safety during the month of November, especially in the lead up to the fireworks festivities. It is the work that is done in planning prior to and after 5th November. The first year that Operation Moonbeam was in force was in 2018 and it has been running successfully since. This was the start of the national campaign based on work previously carried out by North Ayrshire Council.

Situation

In 2017 there was serious disorder in Edinburgh where firefighters were attacked on and around 5th November. Following this, as part of a safety review led by Police Scotland, there was a look at community safety nationally around Bonfire Night. It was identified that there was good practice in North Ayrshire within the Community Safety Partnership. A case study was completed and the work in North Ayrshire became known as Operation Moonbeam.

The Operation Moonbeam national programme is informed by the work that had been done previously in North Ayrshire. For several years, the Safer North Ayrshire Partnership had been working on a number of initiatives to keep communities safe regarding how they worked in partnership, the sale of fireworks, bonfires and ensuring that there was no debris left in streets and gardens. Across the whole of the Community Partnership, they were

looking at the different risks and responses. From 2014 there was a local initiative that was similar to the national Operation Moonbeam campaign. The local initiative related to the sale of fireworks and the building of bonfires in the local communities. Volume of calls was huge, as Bonfire Night and the weekend closest to it is traditionally the busiest time of the year for SFRRS and fire safety. If you reduce the number of bonfires and you can reduce the number of injuries.

Action

The planning process begins about June/July and continues to Bonfire Night. Police Scotland pull together a meeting to start planning the event. There is a reflective look at what has gone on before in the previous year: what happened, what worked well, what did not work well, what do we need to focus on etc. Police Scotland speak about what resources are available. Trading Standards discuss the work that they are doing with Police Scotland, such as checking premises, ensuring that fireworks are sold safely and not being sold to underage persons, ensuring that fireworks are stored safely. There are discussions surrounding any concerns such as premises that need to be visited. Is there any intelligence coming from elected members or the general public. Is there any historical evidence/ intelligence surrounding risk factors from previous years, where work can be done in the lead up to Bonfire Night? This is the early work of Operation Moonbeam.

Other questions are also asked such as what are the practical arrangements that need to be made? What applications are coming in for big firework events? Are they going to be safe and can they be approved? How can they be coordinated? How can they promote safety?

Following these initial planning stages, the plan moves onto communications and the types of messaging to be sent out. This is all done over a series of meetings, and it then moves onto safety. To help with safety they uplift any large items immediately they have been reported to the council and likewise the Street Scene crews will pick up litter to prevent people gathering debris to set fires. In previous years the Street Scene crews were being attacked and Police Scotland had to become involved. This meant that as well as Police Scotland supporting SFRRS they were also supporting the council workers which further stretched resources that were available.

The communications that partners have with one another is very important and they speak to one another on a daily basis and sometimes more than once a day. There is a clear concise communication strategy, so if any messaging is sent out, it is sent out across all the partners. Whatever messaging goes out onto the North Ayrshire website will go onto the Police

Scotland website, the SFRS website and the public will be bombarded with the same information with no mixed messages on how they will react to situations and this is not just Operation Moonbeam, it is the same for all aspects of community safety.

Early intervention is key to working with one another. To help with this the local authority funds a police post which sit amongst the Community Safety Team, which gives access to intelligence both ways. If there is any intelligence from the public, elected members or staff members, the officer can send this to Police Scotland and if Police Scotland have any intelligence that the Community Safety team need to know then they can be informed immediately. It is a two way street.

Communication and engagement is important, especially engagement with schools. There are appropriate presentations from either the SFRS, the local school police or their teachers. There is a partnership effort to the engagement and communications with the school pupils.

At each bonfire site a risk assessment is carried out to see if there is any possibility of the bonfire getting out of hand: this will depend on the size of the bonfire, and proximity to houses. This actually helped to cut down the number of calls to the SFRS. At the start of the initiative there were calls to the SFRS to attend all bonfires just to extinguish them. It became apparent that there was not the need to extinguish all of the bonfires, as some were under control and would burn down on their own: this is how the risk assessments for each site came about. However, if there is a real danger that the SFRS will be called out.

Originally the SFRS went in with the mind-set of changing the culture, but as there is a long history of bonfires they realised that it was not the culture that needed to be changed. Instead of trying something that was unachievable they worked with it. They began with reducing the amount of rubbish that was going to be used. As a result people began storing items that could be used in their gardens, such as furniture and this is where the Enforcement Officers became involved with Notices being issued to get the items removed. There were areas in the local woods where waste was being stored at the back of beyond. Patrols went out to identify and

Question: How so you decide which bonfires do you deploy resources to as you say you do not have enough for someone to be in charge at /present at each bonfire?

Answer: We actually attend them all but we can't be there 24/7. With everything else going on it is difficult to deploy resources to remove bonfire waste as they have other duties. There will be a cut-off point up until which time they will attend immediately. They can only attend sites that are closest to their bases.

remove the stored waste in the run up to Bonfire Night. It is a constant task to remove the waste in the run up to Bonfire Night.

In 2020 the Enforcement Powers were used for the first time. There were commercial businesses that were taking the opportunity to off-load their commercial waste and fixed penalty notices were issued under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 for fly tipping. This was on both public and private ground. The people who were issued with the fixed penalty notices were not prosecuted further but it was enough to send a message out that their actions were unacceptable. We will be able to gauge how effective these fixed penalty notices have been when Bonfire Night comes back round this year.

Each year there are two police cars dedicated to Guy Fawkes Night which respond to the bonfires. If the Enforcement Team and the SFRS need assistance at any bonfire then these cars can be called to assist. One of the big issues for Street Scene are the fireworks themselves, where people let off fireworks in public areas and then walk away leaving the rubbish behind. This then becomes a community safety issue where children can pick up and play with the discarded fireworks and also a litter issue. If spotted, the offenders are reluctant to give Street Scene their details so police are brought in to get their details and to ensure that they will return at the earliest opportunity to tidy up, as it would be unsafe to tidy up there and then. In 2020 there were barricades in the streets to stop access to remove bonfires at some locations showing just how strongly people felt about it.

It is the joint intelligence and joint working that makes the partnership so strong. Police Scotland work with the local communities rather than against them and try to educate them and tell them what they are going to do. It is about safety and everyone enjoying themselves rather than the strict enforcement of going in and shutting them down. There are dedicated internal phone number for immediate responses on the night. Most council service do not work out of hours. Senior managers are given mobiles so that they can communicate with each other if there are any emergencies on the night.

Trading standards work with the police and SFRS to make visits. They have a list of all retailers who have applied for a licence to sell fireworks in North Ayrshire and go out in the run up to Bonfire Night to ensure that they are stored correctly, and that they understand the message about underage sales and responsible selling. As the Trading Standard officers have been in post for many years they have good relationships with the retailers. As there is only one main fireworks retailer in North Ayrshire, if there are problems, they receive phone calls from the retailer directly. With there being only one main trader, there are few problems with sales. Again, communication is the key. The team gets out early enough and speaks to everyone and

they know that Trading Standards are there if required. The complaints about irresponsible trading have tailed off over the years due to the proactive work being undertaken by Trading Standards.

There were more complaints in 2020 as the larger events were cancelled and there was an abundance of commercial fireworks being sold to the general public. People were travelling to make these purchases as they were not available locally. There were complaints from animal owners, and there were complaints about them being brighter and noisier. It was identified that this was a reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic and more people were eager to celebrate Bonfire Night, whereas in the past they may have never done. There is evidence that some people were spending thousands of pounds on fireworks for use in their back gardens. This was picked up and identified through Operation Moonbeam and shared with all of the partners.

Outcome

- North Ayrshire Council has data showing the overall impact of Operation Moonbeam. Some of the outcomes include fewer calls to SFRS, less aggression, less violence. It would be unfair to compare the 2020 results with previous results as there had been a steady decrease in the number of bonfire sites.
- There has been a decrease in the damage caused by bonfires, as they were not as large and less fuel used, due to the proactive approach taken by all the partners before-hand.
- Members of the public and businesses are more aware of the partnership being there to work with them rather than against them.
- In 2020 there were 35 separate bonfire sites identified, which was an escalation on the previous year. The hope is that this will be reduced in 2021.

Reflection

Because there is trust and value in the North Ayrshire Partnership it is easier to get these types of operation off the ground, it is easier to mobilise quickly. It is easier to deal with issues. You cannot do something like this in isolation, you need to have an integrated inter agency partnership which works.

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Interviewees:

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Janine Barrett – Senior Manager with responsibility for Community Safety for North Ayrshire Council

Colin Clark – Liaison Officer for SFRS for North Ayrshire

Fiona Knox – Trading Standards Officer for North Ayrshire Council

Alan Scott – Fly tipping Officer for North Ayrshire Council

Andy Hogg – Police Scotland Local Authority Liaison for North Ayrshire
