

NORTHUMBRIA POLICE

Denton Road – A Test for Police and Community Relations

CIPR PRide Awards 2009

Region: North East PRide
Category number: 4
Category name: Crisis Communications
Name of entrant: Northumbria Police
Campaign title: Denton Road – A Test for Police and Community Relations
Campaign period: Tuesday May 20, 2008 – Friday May 1, 2009
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A. Introduction

On May 20, 2008, 16 year old girl was killed following a collision with a marked police car as she crossed Denton Road in Scotswood, Newcastle upon Tyne

Minor disorder followed resulting in a man being tasered, arrested and missiles being thrown at police throughout the night.

Eyewitnesses immediately reported in the media that the police car did not have emergency lights or siren on, was travelling at excessive speed in a built up area.

There were real concerns that community relations in Scotswood could deteriorate quickly.

During the year potential flashpoints occurred including; the funeral, decision to charge the officer, victim's birthday, the trial and anniversary of the accident.

The case came to trial in April 2009. The officer was found guilty of death by dangerous driving and sentenced to three years imprisonment.

The impact on police officers was significant and there was a need to ensure morale was not adversely affected.

The independent investigation was carried out by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC).

The challenge was to maintain positive community relations over a significant period of time in order to avoid serious disorder.

B. Background

In 1991 a series of riots broke out and Scotswood was one of the areas where significant rioting took place. Since then good relations have been built between the community and police. -----

Following the accident references were made to the 1991 riots and there was anticipation in some sections of the media of a similar situation developing.

C. Communications Objectives

1. To reassure the community and avoid any deterioration in community relations.
2. To ensure consistent external and internal messages.
3. To minimise the risks to Northumbria's reputation.
4. To minimise any inappropriate, speculative or inaccurate reporting.
5. To demonstrate Northumbria's empathy with the victim's family and community.
6. To minimise the impact on employees, particularly those driving response vehicles.

D. Communications Activity

A group was formed representing local police, senior officers and communication professionals to agree a communications strategy.

Media

- Regular media and web updates were issued
- Media given access to a senior neighbourhood officer for interviews throughout – to reassure the community and refute suggestions of disorder developing.
- Supported the family and media by arranging limited access to the funeral
- News conference after the trial with access to a Chief Officer who issued an apology and conducted one to one interviews

- On going direct contact with reporters to address speculation about potential disorder
- Media coverage monitored to respond promptly to inaccuracies and issues arising
- Monitored social networking sites for comment about disorder being planned in the area and to identify local concerns.

Community

- Altered working patterns to ensure neighbourhood officers, known to the community, were on duty at key times and no unfamiliar faces patrolled the area
- Provided local officers with key messages and answers to questions the public might ask
- Met regularly with key community leaders to identify and address local concerns.
- Supported local youngsters holding a memorial vigil
- A film was placed on You Tube, critical of the victim. Although not official family liaison we worked on their behalf to get the film removed quickly

Internal

- Chief officers met face to face with all motor patrols officers to discuss their concerns about issues raised during the trial
- Published updated guidance on the use of emergency lights and sirens
- Briefed and provided key messages to all police officers in the area

Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC)

- Established regular contact with the IPCC to identify information they were releasing and assess the impact on community relations
- Advised on the timing of releases to minimise potential for disorder
- Working together to minimise speculation and ill informed comment

E. Communications Challenges

- There was a concern of public disorder breaking out at various times. The importance of keeping channels of communications open cannot be underestimated and took place on a number of levels; locally with the community, with the media, with partners, internally with staff and also with the independent investigators.
- Keeping updated about what local people said about the incident was important to address inaccuracies quickly before they became “urban myths”
- The IPCC led the investigation and was the primary link with the family. We had to use links with neighbourhood officers to understand the family’s opinion and explain to them the impact of anything they said publicly. Following the trial chief officers met face to face with the family to apologise.
- We advised the IPCC when to release certain updates due to their impact on the community, eg, not prior to a bank holiday weekend due to an increased possibility for alcohol fuelled disorder.
- The CPS issued a video of the accident following the trial upsetting the family. The media incorrectly said it was issued by the police. Excellent media and community links meant we were able to refute this speedily.
- Emergency response officers were concerned about being in similar situations. When the trial concluded we explained the detail of the incident and why the officer driving had been convicted.

F. Evaluation

1. No outbreak of disorder in the local community due to the effort invested in maintaining good communication with the family, local community and the media and policing approach.
2. Officers were given updated community messages and answers to questions throughout the period.
3. Extensive media coverage locally and nationally carried our comments when appropriate. Our apology was widely reported. Media coverage included print and broadcast.
4. References to the previous riots was minimised and inaccurate rumour and speculation quickly contradicted.
5. Community leaders and partners supported our efforts to maintain calm.
6. Through face to face discussion staff understood the facts of the incident and subsequent conviction.

G. Budget

None.

H. Summary

Early recognition of the importance of maintaining effective community and media communications ensured that a potentially difficult situation, which could have resulted in disorder, was averted.

The challenge was to maintain this approach over a significant period of time. Throughout various potential trigger points had to be diluted by using effective communications. The successful use of communications ensured that a crisis did not become a catastrophe.