



Belfast City Council

Report to: Health and Environmental Services

Subject: **Attacks on staff in Environmental Health Service**

Date: 18th January, 2010

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Relevant Background Information

The Health and Environmental Services Department delivers a number of services designed to tackle proactively nuisance and antisocial behaviour which operate both within and outside normal office hours.

At its December meeting, the Health and Environmental Services Committee was apprised of a recent attack on the Community Safety Wardens in North Belfast as part of a general update on community safety. At this meeting, Members asked for a fuller report about recent attacks on community safety wardens, the night time noise team and any other relevant services.

Attack on the community safety wardens – 21 November 2009.

The community safety wardens came under attack on the night of 21 November 2009 at approximately 23:50 in the York Road area. The vehicle used by the community safety wardens had exited North Queen Street onto York Road close to the Grove Wellbeing Centre, where they had just completed a foot patrol of the area. A youth approached the van by standing in the middle of the road and threw a glass bottle (WKD bottle) which smashed the driver's side window and the bottle itself shattered spraying the occupants of the vehicle with glass fragments from both the bottle and window.

The driver brought the vehicle to a stop in a location which he considered to be a safe distance away from the youth where the members of the team got out of the vehicle to ensure each other's welfare. Unfortunately, when they got out of the vehicle the attack continued from other young people who threw bricks. The team rapidly returned to the vehicle, exited the area and returned to base where first aid was administered to staff and the PSNI called to take statements from the officers.

Attack on the night time noise team

On 27 November 2009 at 01.10 hrs 2 members of the night time noise team were assaulted whilst investigating a noise complaint in Cu Chulainn House, in the New Lodge area. The incident occurred after the officers had served a Warning Notice on 2 males who were causing sleep disturbance to nearby residents.

The reaction of these 2 males was extremely confrontational. They blocked the noise team's means of escape and threatened to 'cut their throats'. One of the males slapped the Warning Notice into the chest of the night time noise officer and then pulled the top of his coat and shirt open and stuffed the Notice inside. The night time noise officers were also subjected to a tirade of extreme verbal abuse and were extremely shaken by the incident.

None of the other teams in the Environmental Health Service has suffered from recent violent incidents, however the dog warden service has in the past been subjected to significant verbal and physical abuse.

Key Issues

It is acknowledged that, when playing a perceived enforcement role, the organisation and its staff may face varying degrees of opposition or resistance from alleged perpetrators. The purpose of this report however is to reassure Members that all Council processes were followed before and during these incidents to manage any potential risks. A review was also carried out after each of the incidents to identify any improvements to ensure health and safety of staff involved in undertaking these duties.

1. Attack on the Community Safety Wardens

In relation to the community safety wardens a number of measures were in place to reduce risks and best protect the health and safety of staff:

Prior to and during the incident

- **Training** - To manage the risks associated with attacks, the wardens are trained in the application of dynamic risk assessments, first aid, techniques for handling aggression, physical intervention training and health and safety at work.
- **Risk assessments** - In addition, the senior wardens work with the antisocial behaviour officer for the area to develop risk assessments for specific patrol neighbourhoods and to develop community led interventions to support a reduction in the level, and tackle the root causes, of the antisocial behaviour.
- **PPE** – staff are provided with stab vests and communication equipment to support communication within the patrol teams, but also the police where required.
- **Incident management** - Unfortunately it was not possible to identify the people involved in this attack because the wardens were unable to make descriptions and CCTV footage from the Grove Health and Well Being Centre was not helpful; consequently there have been no arrests. However as noted, statements were provided to the police on the night. Appropriate first aid was provided to the officers involved and counselling support has been offered through BCC's occupational health team.

Post incident

- The wardens service was withdrawn from the area for a total of two weeks whilst we worked with the local communities to encourage them to show visible support for the scheme. This included providing opportunities for Elected Members to accompany the wardens on patrol.
- The Community Safety Coordinator and Antisocial Behaviour Officer for North Belfast have also been working with local communities to identify a number of ways to work together to tackle the antisocial behaviour in the area. For example, a Thursday night football session is being developed with the young people, using the Grove Health and Wellbeing Centre and a community meeting was subsequently held in the Wellbeing centre to discuss encouraging community support.

- The bricks used to attack the staff were removed from the Grove Health and Wellbeing Centre's car park (with the assistance of the Parks and Leisure Department).
- There was a number of specifically organised joint enforcement patrols with the police to tackle underage and on street drinking.
- There was a meeting held with the local PSNI DCU whereby a daily contact arrangement with neighbourhood police was established and to assist the 'dynamic' risk assessment process undertaken by the wardens (i.e. the ongoing risk assessment of the area and situations based on information and assessment).
- Radios have been provided to the PSNI to facilitate better communication with the wardens on patrol.
- Further training was also provided to the wardens covering vehicle and on-foot patrolling tactics (this will be incorporated in initial training in future).
- The windows of the vehicles used by the community safety wardens are being coated with a protective layer to prevent window shatter.

Since November, there have been no further incidents and the patrol area has been expanded to also include Little Americas and Mount Collier; essentially the service now covers the area between the Limestone Road, Cavehill Road and the Shore Road.

2. Attack on the night time noise team

Following the assault, support has been provided for the 2 night time noise officers involved and the team risk assessment reviewed.

The police has been very supportive, a full investigation was carried out and the 2 males responsible for this assault were subsequently arrested and charged. Other measures applied to the community safety wardens, such as protection to the vehicle and adequate training, have already been provided to the Night Time Noise Team.

Resource Implications

Financial

No additional costs.

Human Resources

There are some costs associated with ensuring officers are adequately trained to deal with the risk of attack. The costs associated with this training are were allowed for in the general training revenue estimates for the Service.

Asset and Other Implications

The windows of the vehicles used by the community safety wardens are being laminated to prevent window shatter; the costs for this are included in the 2009/2010 revenue estimates.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Committee notes this report.

Decision Tracking

The Head of Environmental Health will keep the safety of such staff under continuous review.

Key to Abbreviations

BCC - Belfast City Council CCTV – Closed Circuit Television DCU – District Command Unit PSNI – Police Service of Northern Ireland
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Document Attached

None
