

70 Tackling the Fear of Crime

“Hell-on-sea”, “suicide black spot”, “sad symbol of a decline into crime” – these headlines typify the media’s portrayal of Hastings in the late 1990s, leaving the town with the unenviable task of finding ways to shake its reputation as a place “plagued by junkies, perverts and criminals... a magnet for the jobless and mentally ill” (The Sun 1997), “home to drug addicts and social drop-outs” (The Mirror 1997), “the suicide capital of Britain” (Daily Mail 1997) and “the last stop for the poor, the maladjusted, the lonely” (Daily Mail 1999).

Combine media coverage such as this with the Hastings CDRP ranking 2nd worst of the 376 in England and Wales for crimes per 1,000-population, and it’s no surprise that public confidence plummeted, with 98% of respondents in a local survey in 2000 stating crime reduction should be the top priority for the town.

Since then, crime has fallen by 15% and the Hastings CDRP’s progress is reflected in it now edging its way out of the worst quartile, ranking 93rd in 2006.

Yet the fear of crime remained high – disproportionately so – leading to the Hastings CDRP, known as the Safer Hastings Partnership (SHP), launching a robust, holistic and long-term plan to increase feelings of safety among residents and repair the reputation of the town to outsiders.

Its Public Reassurance agenda includes: an innovative, award-winning 11-screen TV network, broadcasting more than 3.5 million community safety messages annually to patrons of McDonalds, Tesco, the local shopping centre and other venues; an interactive website, voted Best Community Site by residents at the local SCIP Web Awards 2006; schools competitions each attracting more than 200 entries and engaging with young people on issues such as anti-social behaviour; and four-page spreads in the local newspaper, known to be a key opinion former in Hastings in regards to feelings of safety.

This approach has so far resulted in the Partnership being invited to hold a weeklong exhibition at the House of Commons in December 2006 to showcase the work that has led to 19.9% and 13.4% increases in the number of residents who feel safe walking alone at night in their neighbourhood and the town centre respectively (2006 SHP Fear of Crime Survey compared with 2001 data). In addition, evaluation of the Partnership’s TV network reveals a staggering 20% increase in the number of residents who now realise that crime is, in fact, falling in Hastings.