Forestry Commission Wales
Coed Y Cymoedd Forest District
Anti Arson initiative 2004

Each year the Forest District deals with over 200 fire incidents. It is known that 99% of these are arson. Each year the same areas are targeted and burnt. Local communities have been saying they have had enough of this, however it is these communities that hold the answer.

Forestry Commission Wales (FCW) has identified certain initiatives where they feel they can have a positive impact on trying to reduce the number of arson incidents. These are: -

- Educational visits and through “Crucial crew “(a presentation by FCW staff of the dangers of fires and what can happen to wildlife and the environment, part of an initiative organised by local authorities, emergency services & utilities to encourage responsible and safe attitudes to possible dangers. It is visited by over 3000 young people (year 6th junior school) every year).
- Supporting other agencies such as South Wales Fire & Rescue Service ‘Fire –Tan’ website and education programme.
- Better forest security
- Anti arson campaign in targeted areas, (which is detailed in this paper).

It was recognised that the educational campaign is a long-term programme. In the short term we are unlikely to change the behaviour of those causing problems in the woodlands and therefore we have to appeal to the community at large to take action to look after their woodland.

Due to current attitudes built up over the years many people don’t see that setting fire to the Valley sides is a crime. FCW therefore needed an initiative that promotes this as a crime so that attitudes will change and communities will stop tolerating such behaviour. Due to the fear of retaliation a mechanism was needed where people can report incidents to the police anonymously. If enough information can be built up the police can go and visit the persons suspected of causing the problem and give them a warning using “Anti Social Behaviour Orders”. Under these new police powers Police don’t have to have proof to go and pay people a visit to warn them off!

We wanted an initiative where FCW keeps a low profile (even though it may be leading the campaign) and is seen as a victim along with the communities who are losing out both financially and through quality of life. The mechanism that was chosen was Crimestoppers.

The public perception of Crimestoppers is that it deals with major crime, murder, burglary etc. Therefore linking Forestry Commission problems of fires with Crimestoppers helps demonstrates that arson is also a serious crime. The campaign involved comprehensive or mass publicity (using the drip, drip, drip approach). This was done at the build up to the fire season and during the fire season (Feb to June each year). It then ceases restarts the following year. Initially a pilot is running in three areas.
Publicity was achieved through press articles, posters, flyers, leaflets, stickers and business cards (the aim being that people can put stickers into telephone books or pin business cards to notice boards rather than just leaflets which get in peoples way) also all public houses were targeted with beer mats.

- All houses in the three areas received a leaflet drop of an A5 flyer
- Posters were put up in public buildings, shops, surgeries, community centres etc, as well as both A5 leaflets and business cards in leaflet dispensers
- All community groups were contacted with supplies of ‘goody bags’ for the group to issue to every group member. The bags will contain pens, notepads, stickers, business cards all with the message and Crimestoppers number The aim being that these will remain in the house longer than just A5 leaflets so there is more chance of people telephoning.

All material featured the campaign message and Crimestoppers telephone number. No other logos were used so the message was not lost in a sea of corporate branding by the supporting organisations.

The campaign was not ‘launched’ as this was deemed not to be effective publicity (just another initiative syndrome) but build up slowly in the chosen areas trying to get people on our side.

The comprehensive publicity will hopefully send a message to arsonists ‘there are people watching who will report you’

A voluntary code was set up with shopkeepers not to sell matches, lighters, and firelighters to under 16 year olds. This may not reduce incidents as it is easy for young people to get hold of matches but by advertising via posters and leaflets in the shop it will help to reinforce the message to local people that starting grass or forest fires is a crime and is a serious problem in their area.

Initial consultations with shop keepers showed that they are in favour of this scheme. Shop keepers were encouraged to put up the posters in shop windows and doors on the entrance into the shop to try and deter the young people actual entering the shop and asking (to avoid the conflict of a shop keeper refusing to sell items)

The campaign is part of a bigger “Safe Forest” initiative being developed by Coed y Cymoedd Forest District

Attached are examples of the Posters, leaflets and beer mats

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