

ONCE A popular seaside resort among wealthy Victorians, Hastings fell into decline, reaching a level of deprivation in 1994 that saw the Government grant the town 'Assisted Area Status'.

While it is true that Hastings has suffered high crime rates, the media spotlight honing in on the town's socio-economic challenges and serious incidents has exacerbated the perception that Hastings is crime-ridden and unsafe.

Hastings Borough Council's (HBC) Citizens' Panel Surveys and the Hastings CDRP's annual Fear of Crime Surveys over the last few years reveal that at least a third of respondents each year feel unsafe in their neighbourhood and in the town centre due to "reports of crime in the media".

With headlines in the national press such as "Hell-on-sea", "the lost resort", "suicide black spot of the 90s" and "amid the decay and despair, ordinary families desperate to find a way out", Hastings has found it hard to shake its reputation as a town "plagued by junkies, pervers 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).

Incidents such as the murder of local teenager Billie-Jo Jenkins in 1997, the shooting of James Ashley during a police raid in 1998, and the kidnapping of two 10-year-old girls in 1999, led to much of this media interest.

In addition to national press, one of (if not the) key opinion formers in the town is the sensationalist and hostile local newspaper, which has replayed such stories at every opportunity ever since.

The *Hastings Observer* sells 21,500 copies per week and its website attracts 200,000 hits per month. There is no local rival publication. By the current editor's own admission, his responsibility is to increase circulation and "bad news sells more papers".

Recent sensationalist and, from the Hastings Partnership's point of view, irresponsible front pages have included:

- CCTV images of a man being viciously beaten by a gang. It was not clear until several paragraphs



Tilley
Award
Finalist
2007

53%
reduction in
vehicle crime
over five years

48%
reduction in
burglary (dwelling)
over five years

45%
reduction in
robbery
over five years

into the story that the incident took place in Eastbourne (a 30-minute drive from Hastings).

- "Armed Raid Terror Hell" was the headline, while the article itself was about an armed robbery in neighbouring town Bexhill.

Similarly negative articles appear throughout the newspaper. In December 2006, the *Observer* ran four full pages based predominantly on a local resident's comment that "Hastings is worse than Hackney".

There was no foundation for this comment; the reporter did not check crime statistics; the woman quoted is neither a prominent local figure nor holds any position of note; no rebuttal from the Hastings CDRP (known as the **Safer Hastings Partnership** or **SHP**) or Sussex Police was printed in that edition.

Even when, in April 2004, the **Partnership** announced significant reductions in crime, including a 4.4% reduction in public place violent crime when predictions had been a 13% increase, the paper focused on the **SHP** giving out post-it notes and business card holders bearing its new logo.

Combine media coverage such as this with previous high crime and it is no surprise that public confidence plummeted to an all-time low.

HBC's Citizens' Panel Survey 2000 asked residents what issues were their priorities. The two most

important issues were found to be crime-related, with the reduction of burglaries by 8% and the reduction of car crime by 7% considered 'important' by 98% of respondents.

By 2001, the Hastings Partnership was ranked 2nd worst of the 376 CDRPs in England & Wales for crimes per 1,000-population.

Reflecting these dramatic reductions, in 2006 the **SHP** was ranked 93rd CDRP in England & Wales, edging its way out of the worst quartile.

Though crime had been falling year-on-year, public perceptions had yet to catch up, with the **SHP's** Fear of Crime Surveys showing that

The Partnership's goal is 50% of residents feeling safe walking alone in their neighbourhood at night by the end of the 2008/09-performance year

The **SHP** brought together both statutory and non-statutory partners, including Sussex Police, HBC and local housing associations, to work together on putting in place numerous initiatives to reverse these crime trends and to aid the socio-economic regeneration of the town.

These measures combined to bring about significant reductions. Sussex Police's figures for the last performance year (2006/07) show that dwelling place burglary has fallen 48% compared to 2001/02, robbery is down 45% and vehicle crime has dropped 53% over that same period.

These and other reductions amount to a 15% overall reduction of crime in Hastings.

50% of respondents did not know crime had been falling significantly over the last five years.

The **Partnership's** goal, as outlined as a key target in the Community Strategy 2003-2013, was 50% of residents feeling safe walking alone in their neighbourhood at night by the end of the 2008/09-performance year.

With reports of crime in the media influencing the feelings of safety of at least a third of survey respondents, reversing the damage caused by previous high crime and the spotlight of the national media, especially when still facing a particularly sensationalist, hostile and unrivalled local newspaper, requires a long-term strategy of sustained public reassurance initiatives.