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Is the Redruth curfew the future?

This summer, the small Cornish town of Redruth imposed a curfew on its children — and many residents declared it a success. So is this the future of policing for Britain's troubled streets? Photographs by Leo Maguire



Picture by Ed Caesar

Life, as every adolescent knows, is always unfair. But the teenagers of the Close Hill estate in Redruth have had special cause for grievance this summer. When the last school bell of the year rang out and they were released into an ocean of holiday, they must have dreamt of kissing and illicit drinking and endless evenings in the park. Instead, they got rain and a curfew.

The scheme is called Operation Goodnight. In early July, 680 households in the north of this old Cornish tin town received letters informing them that for six weeks, starting on July 25, under-16s were to be home by 9pm and under-10s by 8pm. The curfew would be “voluntary”, although all families would be “encouraged” to sign up. Continual failure by parents to abide by the curfew would occasion a social-housing visit or a parenting order. It was, said its principal architect, PC Marc Griffin, “possibly the first scheme of its kind in the country”.

Why on earth did this little patch of Redruth – its streets of 1950s council housing sprouting symmetrically from a central road like a split onion – need a teen curfew? Over the past few years, many on the estate have complained about antisocial behaviour, but crime in Redruth remains well below the national mean (if a little above the Cornish average). Anyway, it is not as if the police are short of powers for dealing with antisocial behaviour. Perhaps more significantly, why did the residents of Close Hill agree to these restrictions? There was a time when working-class communities would never think of involving the police in solving their problems. Now, it seems, everyone has the Asbo hotline on speed-dial. Moreover, why are the kids being targeted? Are they the only troublemakers in Close Hill? And is what is happening in Redruth a benign experiment, or a symptom of a sinister mutation in our social DNA?

PC Griffin meets me at something called “the Kabin”, a rectangle of plywood filled with strip lights and plastic chairs, built by the Helping Hands community group of Close Hill. An amiable copper known to all on the estate as Marc – and to his colleagues as “Guffs”, for some reason – he has won the respect of his flock the hard way. On his first day as neighbourhood beat manager in Close Hill, on October 4, 2004, one local told him what to expect. “Some of the people up here,” said his forthright host, “won’t give you the shit off their shoes.” Now, when he walks his patch, residents stop him for a chat.

The curfew was Griffin’s idea. “We would have meetings of the partners – community representatives, police, social landlords and the antisocial-behaviour team,” he says. “The issue of antisocial

behaviour was always talked about. A lot of the residents would pray for rain on a Friday night so they'd get a good night's sleep and wouldn't have to listen to noise and swearing. It's basically a good place, with a good community spirit, but there were what you might call quality-of-life issues we needed to address."

In the winter of 2007-8, the community applied for, and was granted, a dispersal order to break up groups of young people after dark. The scheme ran for 12 weeks and was, says Griffin, a "huge success". Crime and antisocial behaviour went down in the area. For the summer of 2008, Griffin and the partners devised the curfew. "We were also aware that a lot of young people were becoming vulnerable by being out on their own late at night – vulnerable to being victims of crime or becoming involved with it themselves – and we wanted parents to take more responsibility," says Griffin. "So I suggested this idea of a voluntary curfew, to be trialled over six weeks, to see whether we could make a change."

"Voluntary" is the difficult word. There was no residents' assembly, no vote on the matter. Instead, there was unanimous agreement by the dozen or so people who attended one meeting that a curfew would be a good idea. The scheme was conceived and being monitored by "the partners". Griffin is untroubled by these niceties. "I thought, let's just try it," he says. "It's not been imposed. We wanted it to be a chance for the community to be part of something this summer: a low-key, locally delivered initiative."

The scheme required no extra resources: it was policed by Griffin and his community-support officers. This is possible, he says, because it gives the community "the tools to police itself", but that's not really what's going on. The kids go inside at 9pm because the parents know that at 8pm or 9pm there is an official presence on the street. This may not be a police-enforced curfew, but it is certainly police-maintained. While Griffin and his colleagues do their work sensitively – they would never make a fuss over under-16s coming back late from constructive activities such as sports practice or music lessons, for instance – their message is unequivocal: look after your children or we will do it for you.

To some, restricting the activities of an entire age group might seem creepily like intrusion, but this is not the way most residents see it. Griffin, too, balks at the suggestion: "People talk about human-rights issues. But what about the rights of people to go into their front gardens and talk to each other over the fence? What about the rights of people to sleep with their windows open at night? Don't those people have rights? I think the curfew is a necessary and proportionate response to a problem. We've got a duty to look after everyone in the community."

Griffin seems to have caught the mood. On the two occasions I visited during curfew – once in early August, and once later in the month – not only was the estate a paragon of civility, but nobody once mentioned any trouble with the ethics of their situation. All they cared about was peace and quiet, which they had desired and got. Indeed, on both visits, the evenings were marked not by foul language and the smashing of glass, but by the hum of drizzle and the miaow of cats. We'll come back to the cats. Older residents like Jenny and Francis Jacker, whose lives were made a misery by frequent all-night shenanigans outside their front windows, are thrilled.

"We used to have it at all hours, but not so much any more," says Jenny, who, like her husband, is retired. "They'd be drinking and swearing loudly. I'd never go out and say anything to them, because I'd get abuse then. It's been a big success, the curfew, although I'd say probably 95% of the kids around here are fine anyway. It's only a few of them. And actually the older ones are worse. They sleep all day and come out at night, like mushrooms."

Meanwhile, up the road on Harmony Close, Fiona Thomas, who runs a catering company, thinks the curfew is a good, if limited, idea. "It's been better up here since the curfew, no doubt," she says. "But really it's not the kids who are the problem; it's the adults. We've had fights between neighbours, adults drinking all night, parties. But the curfew is good because it punishes the parents – they have to look after their kids now, and that makes the kids behave better."

Fiona's son, Luke, a police cadet whose junior boxing trophies line every available mantelpiece in the house, is more phlegmatic. "It doesn't affect me because I'm 16, but it wouldn't anyway, because I'd

never have been hanging around with those kids anyway,” he says. “I do know some really good kids who are 14 or 15 who have to go home early when they’re playing football or whatever, which is a bit unfair, but it does generally keep the muppets off the street.”

One of the “muppets” lives eight doors away. Andrew Knowles, who is 15 and knows PC Griffin extremely well, is the boy most frequently named as a “troublemaker” by neighbours. On the first night of the curfew he bragged to any reporter who would listen that he was never going to be in by 9pm. “Nine o’clock is not fair,” he said. “It’s still light then. You want to be out with your mates having a laugh.”

“Knowlesy”, however, has been no trouble during the curfew. On the night I call at his house, his spotty face and bleached hair greet me at the door. He is in with his father, Michael, at 8.30pm. His neighbours, too, report a distinct drop in Knowles-related antisocial behaviour. “He’s been as good as gold,” says Fiona. “But then I never had no trouble with him ever, anyway.”

In fact, most of the children have abided by the curfew, although the girls seem keener on it than the boys. In a playground at a little before 9pm on a Thursday night, there is a group of 20 or so 11- to 15-year-olds messing about on the swings and ramps. Will they be in by curfew time? “Yeah,” chirp the girls. “No!” shout the two boys with matching dyed mohawks who are sharing a cigarette. So when will the boys be in? “Nine-thirty,” they say. Such defiance.

It is hard to square these likable, scruffy kids with the picture painted by the older residents. To them the teenagers are dangerous, rude and aggressive. Of the dozens of adults I spoke to in Redruth, most said they would never walk outside their door to tell a group of children to stop making noise or to move elsewhere. “You just get abuse yourself if you try,” said one, who would not give me his name because of fear of “reprisals”. “I’d rather phone the police.”

The readiness to phone the cops at the first sign of trouble is new. An older shopkeeper admits he is dumbfounded by the curfew – not that the police had tried to impose it, but that the estate had accepted it. “When I grew up round here, and that was a long, long time ago,” he says, “you’d rather die than bring dishonour to your door. We were little buggers back then too, don’t get me wrong. You just never brought it home.”

Although Close Hill’s experiment is the first of its type in England, it is by no means the first. In 2000 the Scottish town of Hamilton enforced its own teen curfew, using new Home Office powers. It had a positive effect on the area’s crime statistics – the police claimed that juvenile crime was down 49% in its pilot year – but some felt it was, in the end, unsuccessful. Stuart Waiton, a writer and former youth worker who witnessed it, and has since written a book entitled *Scared of the Kids*, is adamant that measures of this kind have an insidious effect. “What happens is, they combine the fear of kids with a fear for kids,” he says. “The Hamilton curfew was sold as a child-safety initiative – the police were very self-conscious for it not to appear anti-youth. All the authoritarian overtones were just forgotten.

“What I found, in Hamilton, was that most parents were naturally over-cautious with their children anyway: it wasn’t the case that most parents let their kids run riot. So the curfew reinforced a kind of paranoid parenting. The pressure is that to be a good parent, you have to always be a safe parent, which is not necessarily the best thing for the parents, the kids or the community. But the only real moral absolute today is child safety.”

Waiton thinks the curfew in Hamilton was a symptom of a wider problem – one that I noticed within hours of being in Close Hill – of how adults react to children who are not their own. Not only are adults scared of what the children might do to them immediately, but they are afraid of reprisals from the kids or their parents. It’s worth noting that these fears are not entirely without foundation. On Harmony Close, windows and doors are frequently “put in” by disgruntled neighbours. Fiona’s catering van was even firebombed once, although the age of the arsonist was never discovered.

"I think there's a genuine problem around how adults and children react to each other," says Waiton. "Can you shout at other people's children? Would other parents back you up if you told a child off? It's not a comfortable issue, and it's not one that can be solved by casing it in antisocial-behaviour language. But the government is not prepared, or doesn't have the imagination, to address these problems.

"In a lot of cases, kids are out of control. But it's not because they're doing anything different from what they used to. Kids are a gas: they'll fill any space that's given to them. What it means is, nobody controls public space any more – there's a vacuum of adult authority on the streets."

Marc Griffin was astute enough to realise that there was a vacuum of authority in Close Hill. His solution, the curfew on under-16s, is one way of dealing with part of the problem.

It makes parents become responsible for their own children, if not the children of the community at large. It's noticeable that when it comes to 9pm in Close Hill, and Griffin is making his rounds, you see parents who have come out to find their children and are taking them home. "This is amazing," says Griffin. "I honestly never thought I'd see this."

But is this paternalistic approach the role we want for the police? Griffin thinks so: "For me, this is quite a clever way of going out and encouraging the community to stop problems from starting in the first place. Rather than dealing with a group of young people who have perhaps thrown a stone through a window, we would rather speak to them before they've done it, when they're on the streets at 10.30pm, and ask what they're up to. That way, we don't put them through the criminal-justice process and they don't become criminalised. And they're learning behavioural and social boundaries."

Next door to the Knowleses on Harmony Close is a house with a picture of a rottweiler on the door and the slogan "I can reach the gate in two seconds. Can you?" Beside this welcome note is a sign reading, "The remains of trespassers will be buried". I knock on the door. A man with a moustache and a rottweiler belt buckle opens the door. Behind him, there is furious barking.

"The curfew don't work," he says. "Everyone says it's Andrew [Knowles] causing all the trouble, but I don't have no trouble. He's being blamed for all the older ones up to no good. Also, what do you think they do when the police patrol ends at 10.30? They're all out again, aren't they?"

The complaint that the curfew is targeting youngsters when it is adults who cause most of the problems is made by residents of all ages. Fiona Thomas says some adults have an acute alcohol problem. This patch of Cornwall, statistics show, is one of the 10 unhealthiest places in Britain. A community worker says it is because many are "on the sick" without a genuine need to be. I discover locals' alternative name for Harmony Close is Disability Alley.

Close Hill suffers from a kind of inertia. Part of the problem is that Redruth, like much of Cornwall, is defiantly insular. To Redruthians, both London and Devon are "up-country". Many children in Close Hill have never seen the sea, which is only 20 minutes' drive away. And many adults are at home during the day. One or two houses are notorious for their sedentary, disruptive lifestyles. When I rang one doorbell, a neighbour came out to tell me that the family inside "won't be up until 2pm – and they'll have a drink in their hand by 3pm". In this environment, is it a surprise that a few kids are led astray?

Pippa Davey, a feisty 17-year-old redhead with a cigarette in her mouth and a baby on the way, says she spent much of her early teens "getting into trouble, because of drink and drugs and the people I used to hang around with". Griffin arrested her more times than he can remember. But she has since turned her life around and hasn't been arrested for eight months. She has three younger siblings, all in their teens, and she can see her oldest sister starting to make the same mistakes she did at a similar age. "Curfew's good," she says. "I don't want them out doing the same shit I done. I think if I'd had a curfew, it honestly would have changed my life. They should do it for more than six weeks, though. They should do it for a year."

Perhaps she is right. Perhaps a year-round curfew would stop more young people finding themselves in trouble. Indeed, Griffin says that several residents have asked for the scheme to be extended. One resident, Francis Thomas, thinks the scheme has achieved a short-term success: he can sleep with his windows open at night. "But what good's six weeks? It doesn't solve nothing."

In those six weeks, though, juvenile crime and juvenile vulnerability to crime have come down, says Griffin. Residents feel they have "reclaimed their community". The curfew has given them more confidence to speak up to disruptive children, if only to let them know it is nearly 9pm. These victories are all worth celebrating, but one can't help feeling the curfew has not addressed the underlying tensions. Has it achieved its successes because the kids are inside at 9pm? Or because, every night, a copper does his rounds to make sure they are? Do the police and the community talk to each other more frequently, and do problems now tend to be resolved without recourse to criminal-justice measures?

If so, praise be, but it is not the curfew in itself that has achieved the new *détente*. This is just old-fashioned community policing.

Griffin says he has been contacted by two or three police forces in other "difficult areas" who might replicate the experiment. They will be at once encouraged and disheartened by the practicalities of the curfew. The encouraging thing is that, if you ask parents (and put financial pressure on them) to look after their children – if you say that their social-housing contract comes with responsibilities – they will do so. This has been one great achievement. Parents who once had no idea where their children were for large parts of the day are forced to connect with them, if only for part of the evening. The discouraging thing is that Close Hill may be the easiest area in Britain to police effectively. You could walk the entire plot in 20 minutes. People know each other and are happy to talk to the police. Some kids may be troublesome, but none are dangerously violent. Making this scheme work in Moss Side might be more challenging.

What few people have asked is whether there should have been a curfew in the first place. If it is possible to send a letter to 680 households asking them to take part in a "voluntary scheme" to look after their kids better, is it not possible to contact those parents when their spotty darlings are causing trouble? Griffin says that the curfew's "cleverness" is that it encourages children to be at home before they become the perpetrators, or victims, of trouble. But is the idea that one addresses antisocial behaviour after it has happened, rather than before, so preposterous?

Now, back to those cats. In Close Hill's curfew summer, they've been the big winners. "Ever since we started the scheme in July, I've seen more and more of them," says Griffin. He's right. The air is thick with the sound of purring. Why? "I think it's the peace and quiet," he says.

But Close Hill has other nocturnal beasts. Sometimes you only hear them: a faint shuffle of trainers, a sharp intake of breath or a suppressed giggle. Sightings can occur on clear nights. Griffin will be on his beat, calling on neighbours, checking their children are at home safely. And 20 yards behind him are two or three teenage scamps shadowing his every move and having the night of their lives. It's proof that you can shut the kids up, but you can never shut them down.