



Divine intervention

DRIVING through a grey sea of smoke-belching industrial plants, pipelines and scrap yards on the north bank of the River Tees, it feels like you are nearing the end of the world. Passing the wasteland remains of Haverton Hill, a town evacuated and demolished in the 1960s because of sulphuric acid pollution, the road suddenly bends to reveal trees and rows of neat homes.

A small, isolated community of just under 1,000 people in 400 council homes, the Clarences is a prime example of social exclusion in present day Britain. Instead of cinemas, parks and bars, its residents have chemical plants, Britain's largest toxic waste dump and Hartlepool nuclear power station for company.

Unemployment, much of it long-term, is four times the national rate and there is a high incidence of obesity and heart disease. Access to the nearest amenities at Stockton and Middlesbrough are limited and only a third of households own a car.

Yet, despite all this, there is an air of optimism in the Clarences. The community's spirit, which for a long time received a battering from high levels of drug abuse, crime and a bad reputation, is alive and kicking. Although recent research has shown there is a significant problem with young women taking amphetamines, heroin use in the Clarences has fallen despite rocketing in neighbouring towns and cities.

ENTER THE DRAGON

The Clarences – a collective name for Port and High Clarence – was earmarked for demolition in the 1970s when Teesside's chemical, shipbuilding and steel industries started haemorrhaging jobs. A decade later, with work drying up, high levels of pollution and limited access to nearby towns and cities, the borough council offered residents the chance of a new life away from the Clarences. Remarkably, they chose to stay put.

Despite an extensive programme of housing renovation in the late 80s, their stubborn decision was to prove a tough one. The spread of heroin hit the Clarences in the mid 90s and visiting GPs also reported high levels of tranquillisers, cannabis and alcohol use. The Clarence's heroin problem made the headlines in 1996 after seven children were injured after playing with discarded syringes dumped by heroin users in the playground at Port Clarence Primary School. Crimes such as burglary, joy-riding, shoplifting and vandalism rose, while dealers and users became more visible in the streets. Many users ended up in jail. Drug abuse proved hard to tackle because services were so far

The conditions were ripe for drugs to blight a deprived and stranded Teesside community. But, with the help of two nuns, a strong community spirit and some well-targeted funding, the Clarences has worked from within to get back on its feet. **Max Daly** investigates



Changing times: children in the Clarences face a more positive future

away and services found education and harm reduction difficult because the Clarences' close knit residents were distrustful of outsiders.

GUARDIAN ANGELS

So what pulled the Clarences away from the brink? Sarah Chapman, whose 24-year-old son Jason is attending a rehab clinic in

Spain following a five-year addiction to heroin, says one of the major factors was the arrival of two sisters from the Rome-based Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto) congregation. Imelda Poole and Philippa Green arrived in the Clarences 16 years ago as part of the order's mission to work at grassroots level to improve communities around the world.

"They were guardian angels those two," says Chapman, who has lived on the estate for 30 years. "They did everything they could have for this community. Until people come and see the Clarences they don't understand that it's a better place to be in now."

"The Clarences had some of the worst public services provision we saw in England and Wales and so we decided to work there," says a bright-eyed Poole, who, like her colleague, goes about her business in casual clothes. Both speak calmly, frankly and are passionate about the people they came to help.

"The only resources the residents had was a mobile housing unit and two GPs who visited for about four hours a week each. The health provision was worse than where I had previously been working in Kenya. It was very run down and there was little there for people's social, mental, spiritual or physical well-being. The churches had been knocked down, the community centre

a community back from the brink

was closed and all the statutory bodies had gone.”

The sisters visited every family over two years to find out what the community needed. “When we first arrived drugs were not a problem. But in the mid-90s things changed. It was a poor area and people were looking for a quick high. People in the Clarendons were plain bored. Drugs became part of the conversation, parents were worried about their children because there were a few lads who ended up in jail. Getting people into treatment seemed hard,” says Green. “They wanted help, but then they met the system. It reacted too slowly and didn’t understand their needs.”

HEART OF THE MATTER

So what exactly did they do? Dave Adams, Principal Regeneration Officer at Stockton on Tees Borough Council during 1990s, says their arrival in the community in 1988 acted as a catalyst. “The changes in the Clarendons were underpinned by the sisters. This cannot be over emphasised enough. It would have been very easy in that area for the community spirit to have shrunk and become inward looking. But what the sisters did was to constantly remind people that this was their home. Without them the housing and regeneration would not have been as effective. They put the heart back into the community. The reason you don’t see people taking drugs in the street now is because the community has rediscovered itself.”

The once dilapidated community centre now does exactly what it says on the tin. It has been refurbished and now plays an integral role in the life of Clarendons residents, who use its café and garden as a regular place to meet, chat and hang out. The area now has a full time nurse practitioner based in a new, award-winning health centre. Like fairy godmothers, the sisters have gone in a flash. Last month the head of their order in Rome called them from their post in the Clarendons to go and help out in Albania.

The good work of the sisters in galvanising residents to demand better services has been underpinned by well-organised assistance from Stockton on Tees Borough Council and central government projects such as Sure Start. Last year the Healthy Living Centre, based inside the community centre, opened, with cash from the New Opportunities

Programme, Neighbourhood Renewal, the Primary Care Trust and the Church Urban Fund. The centre provides a creche, bill paying facility, counselling sessions, children’s days out and adult education classes, as well as recycling, army cadettes, boxing, drug education and healthy eating clubs. A youth centre is being developed. “A lot of communities have similar problems but this response is unique because it came from residents’ ideas,” says centre manager Pat Clemence.

LEGACY

Although problems with drugs, crime and anti-social behaviour have decreased in the Clarendons, they have not disappeared. Police drug squads have raided two homes in the last two months, while a survey carried out for Stockton on Tees DAT revealed a trend in amphetamine use, most notably among young women. Around 30 residents are problem speed or cannabis users. Clemence thinks the popularity of speed is linked to the high levels of obesity in the Clarendons because the drug causes weight loss.

Sue Steward, nurse practitioner at the Clarendons, says the area’s years of neglect have taken their toll on her patients. “They get chronic diseases, heart attacks and coronary artery disease 10 years younger than the rest of Britain. I put it down to stress, unemployment, bad food and smoking. There is no fresh fruit or veg here.”

For an area which is still shunned by taxi drivers because of its old reputation, the Clarendons is eerily quiet. The only people in the main street at noon are two boys who have just bought a bag full of cigarettes, cider and lager. “It’s boring here, that’s been the problem all the time,” says lifetime resident Graham Harrod, 47, who runs the corner shop. “We could do with more for the kids to do at night. But at least there isn’t the drug addicts causing trouble.”

The story of the Clarendons, says former Stockton mayor Ann McCoy, a Clarendons ward councillor since 1987, is a lesson for other parts of the country. “We knew it would be 20 years before an improvement was tangible. Quick fixes don’t work. If people think that slapping a bit of paint here and there will make everything funky dory then they will be sadly disappointed.

“You need to give people pride, self-worth, ambition and a belief in the future. This has helped to reduce the drug problem. If you don’t have any of these then people look at alternative ways of getting self-esteem. You have to be patient to make the dream deliverable.” ■

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