

Authorised Professional Practice

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Case Study

The Death of Mary Fox, Bodmin, 2009

On Thursday, 5 November 2009 Mary Fox was the victim of a fatal house fire. Her 17-year-old son, Raum, escaped through a first-floor window.

Although initial indications suggested an accident, forensic teams found the remains of a firework behind the front door of the house. Neighbours also reported ASB around the estate during the evening of the fire.

A press report the following day made national front page news and, based on interviews with local residents, wrongly portrayed Mary as having learning difficulties. The investigation was also linked to the Pilkington case in Leicester where one of the victim's had learning difficulties and had suffered abuse from local youths.

When a murder investigation was launched 12–16 hours after the fire had started, it was identified as a Critical Incident. The investigation team needed to catch up quickly, rebuild family and community confidence and trust, as well as correct inaccurate press reporting. The SIO drew on previous experience and used pre-existing networks and groups to do this.

In the first instance the SIO met the family and consulted multi-agency partners. A live press conference was held on the Saturday morning on SKY News, to correct press inaccuracies and to reassure the family. This marked the beginning of a proactive media strategy and helped reassure the local community.

Bodmin is in rural east Cornwall, and the Berryfields Estate where the fire took place is in an area of social and economic deprivation. To reassure the

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community and encourage a positive response, the SIO integrated local neighbourhood teams (a recognised presence in the community) into the investigation team, particularly to assist in house-to-house, CCTV, neighbourhood and arrest team enquiries. Previous experience of parachuting specially trained tactical teams into rural areas had proved negative, increasing suspicion and undermining cooperation with local people.

In addition, the SIO tapped into pre-existing local networks (Key Individual Networks (KINs) which included representatives from the local community, council, neighbourhood watch and church) and a standing Critical Incident Working Group whose IAG members were able to act as critical friends and assist the SIO in developing strategies and policy to address community needs and tensions. The KINs were used proactively to engage with communities, assist with the media campaign and appeal locally for information and witnesses.

Devon and Cornwall Constabulary had invested significant time in establishing KIN networks in their local communities. The network in Bodmin was particularly strong, and provided the SIO with access to key community representatives, helping to build trust and confidence in the investigation and encourage cooperation.

Three local teenagers were arrested and charged with the manslaughter of Mary. As the offenders were from the same estate as the victim and her family, the SIO undertook extensive community impact assessments in consultation with the KINs when considering whether to bail the offenders. The boys were found guilty of manslaughter and arson in May 2010 and all received custodial sentences.

For further information contact Devon and Cornwall Constabulary