

PC Ben – building community engagement with children

Using the children's picture book 'Police Constable (PC) Ben' to introduce children to the varied role of the police while focusing on themes of kindness, community and commitment.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Anti-social behaviour Community engagement Neighbourhood crime
Organisation	Thames Valley Police
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Region	South East
Partners	Police Education
Stage of Implementation	The practice is implemented.

Key details

Start date	April 2021
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people Communities Families

Aim

PC Ben is children's book designed to educate children about the role of the police in the community. Children often perceive the police as being the people who catch 'robbers' or 'bad people'. The initiative encourages primary school children to consider or realise the varied nature of modern policing and their role in the community. PC Ben aims to change that while at the same time building trust and confidence with children from an early age.

Intended outcome

The intended outcome of PC Ben is to build trust and confidence with children from an early age. PC Ben helps children to know that should they ever need help or advice, they can approach and engage with the police.

PC Ben has also been designed to educate children so that they know more about the role of the police than what they may have originally perceived; as well as strengthening links between neighbourhood teams and their local schools and nurseries.

Description

Since 2021, officers from neighbourhood teams across Thames Valley Police (TVP) have been taking the PC Ben book into their respective primary schools. When visiting schools, officers will read the story of PC Ben to the children whilst also showing the illustrations. Following the reading of the story, officers will host a question-and-answer session with the children about what they have learnt from the story, but also anything else they may want to ask in relation to the police.

Sometimes these questions are pre-prepared by the children in conjunction with the teacher prior to the officer's visit; whereas on other occasions the questions will be taken as the children think of them following on from the reading.

More often than not teachers sit in on the PC Ben sessions and will help the children prepare questions for the officer. Sometimes, the teachers will follow up the sessions by contacting the attending officer(s) with a thank you card or messages of thanks from the children. The children will often draw the PC Ben character and either send these illustrations onto the attending officer(s) or display them their classrooms.

The story of PC Ben is told in a gentle and entertaining way with colourful and engaging illustrations. It highlights key messages and shows how police can help vulnerable people such as the homeless, the elderly and victims of crime. There are also further examples of how officers assist when someone goes missing and the safeguarding support they provide.

The story of PC Ben shows how dynamic the role of a police officer is; from dealing with broken down vehicles, to a report of a lost bicycle, whilst at the same time having a visible presence and engaging with the local community. The story also teaches children how officers respond to reports of theft, showing that not all reports of crime will end with an arrest. It shows that the police can use other measures such as community resolution to educate individuals about their actions and hopefully deter them from committing crime in the future.

Following the input, officers provide the school with a copy of the book as well as PC Ben stickers and colouring sheets. In addition to PC Ben materials being taken into schools and nurseries, PC Ben is also being used at fetes and other community events where there is a neighbourhood policing presence.

The book was both written and illustrated by serving Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) David Bullock. As a result of the incredibly positive response from children, teachers and parents, the book has now turned into a series, with a further three books having been published. The book began as an engagement tool, which was used by the author, PCSO Bullock when visiting local primary schools. PC Ben has been fully endorsed by TVP and is now used as a force wide engagement initiative, being used by every neighbourhood team in TVP to build and strengthen relationships with their local schools and nurseries, and to ultimately build trust and confidence with children from an early age.

Evaluation

A structured evaluation process was started for PC Ben by TVP; however, it was hindered by COVID-19. The proposed format of the evaluation was to identify four primary schools in a specific policing area of Thames Valley to see if they would be willing to take part in an evaluation of the initiative. The teachers from the four identified schools would then be asked to ask their students two initial questions:

- What do the police do?
- Can you tell us another thing that the police do?

The answers from these questions would then be shared with an allocated PCSO who would record them on an excel spreadsheet. The four schools would then be visited, and the PC Ben input would be delivered to the children. After 14 days, the teachers would be asked to repeat the questions to their students to gauge the impact and effect of the PC Ben input and whether their knowledge and perceptions of the police has changed. Again, the answers would then be fed back to the PCSO, as well as the number of students provided answers – the responses would aid continued evaluation and learning.

Since the launch of the initiative, many children see PC Ben as a hero and even refer to officers who they may encounter outside of the school setting, as PC Ben. The books and inputs from officers have had such a significant impact that officers have found children saying that they want to be 'just like PC Ben' when they are older and have even dressed up as the PC Ben character for World Book Day.

Overall impact

The PC Ben initiative has proved to be an overwhelming success. Through the Violence Reduction Unit, funding was acquired which allowed TVP to purchase enough copies of the PC Ben book from Amazon to allow them to be given to every primary school in the force as part of the delivery of the initiative. It is three years into the implementation of PC Ben, and the inputs are forming a core part of the school curriculum, particularly at the beginning of the academic year and during the 'People Who Help Us', stage of the curriculum; whereby neighbourhood PCSO's and PC's attend and deliver the input.

Discussions with teachers in schools across Windsor and Maidenhead revealed that the children now have a far better understanding of what the police do because of the PC Ben initiative and their trust in the police is much stronger.

The feedback from officers has been incredibly positive. Officers have commented that they enjoy reading the book and that they deem it to be an invaluable resource. PC Ben enables them to frame a school talk, in whichever format it may be around the reading of the book. This approach is particularly beneficial for newer officers who perhaps haven't had as much experience of delivering talks to children before. Overall, the PC Ben initiative provides a ready-made resource for all officers, with a proven track record of success.

The reach of PC Ben has already extended beyond TVP, with both Guernsey Police and Northamptonshire Police having adopted the initiative. The second book in the PC Ben series has also had an incredibly positive impact. With the theme of the book being diversity and kindness, it is currently being used as the centrepiece to an anti-bullying campaign in South and Vale, with senior officers there stating that this initiative should be rolled out force wide.

Learning

A lot of planning went into the implementation of PC Ben. It was taken into consideration that some officers may not feel confident to read in front of children in a classroom setting. Therefore, it was ensured that officers still had the opportunity to deliver the input via a different format. A video of the author reading the book was taken and then provided to each neighbourhood team in the force. Should officers not feel confident enough to read or didn't want to deliver in this format then they can play the video in replacement, followed by the regular question and answer sessions and delivery of materials such as colouring sheets and stickers.

Officers not having the confidence to read the book, or not wanting to deliver their input in this format could have been a potential barrier to the success of the initiative. However, by creating the aforementioned video we have found that this had alleviated any fears or concerns that those officers with limited experience of public speaking may have had and has allowed them to engage with the initiative. We have also found that for some, after delivering the PC Ben inputs using the video, they have become more confident and over time eventually start reading the book themselves.

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