



Gloria Johnson, who lives on the Bemerton Estate in Holloway, inspects the damage caused by youngsters

PLEASE LEAVE A MESSAGE...

NEIGHBOURHOOD police teams across Islington are only working one weekend in every three, the Tribune has learned.

Residents said they were shocked to learn that the teams – brought in to combat thuggery, vandalism and low-

by **MARK BLUNDEN**

level crime – are not on the beat when they are most needed.

One pensioner has taken to calling the teams “Dolly Partons” – because she says they only work nine to five –

while a leading national newspaper columnist said Islington was in danger of providing only “gesture policing”.

The news about the teams’ shift in pattern comes after youth gangs high

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Youths' Sunday rampage

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on super-strength skunk cannabis went on a Sunday night rampage on the Bemerton Estate in Holloway.

All 16 wards in the borough have their own dedicated Safer Neighbourhoods team, consisting of a sergeant, two constables and up to three Police Community Support Officers.

But residents say the teams, who work until midnight on some weekdays, are failing to provide weekend cover - when they are most needed.

Peter Osborne, the respected Daily Mail columnist and Highbury resident, said: "We all understand it's a very difficult job being a policeman and I'm all in favour of neighbourhood policing.

"I want to see lots more of it because it is a great reassurance to the community."

"(But) there is a danger of gesture policing and of diminishing pub-

lic trust rather than increasing it.

"When they announced neighbourhood policing they didn't say it would be occasional policing.

"One weekend in three is not the same as having neighbourhood policing."

On Sunday night at the Bemerton, off Caledonian Road, tenants sensed trouble as soon as the sickly sweet smell of skunk started to fill the stairwells of Perth House and Selkirk House.

Before long, the youngsters - by now as high as they were bored - took to booting through a number of reinforced glass panels in the two blocks, causing hundreds of pounds worth of damage.

But the Caledonian ward team had taken the long May bank holiday weekend off, leaving no one to deal with the destruction.

Gloria Johnson, 70, a former railway worker, said: "You could smell the skunk they were smoking in my living

room, it was terrible.

"There was a hell of a racket and someone kicked in the glass.

"I called the neighbourhood police but there was no reply, the message just said to call 999.

"But when you call 999 they refer you straight back to the neighbourhood police."

By Tuesday, infuriated by the service she received, the irked pensioner had got to the root of the problem - almost non-existent police cover on weekends.

Mrs Johnson said: "It's unbelievable that for two weekends in a row there is no police cover - just when we need it most.

"We mostly don't need the team here in the daytime when the kids are at school, it's late at night and on the weekends."

The teams work shifts of either 2pm to 10pm, 4pm to 12am, 8am to 4pm or 10am to 6pm plus rest days. They work one weekend in every three on an eight-day shift pattern.

Officers will work sev-

en late shifts and have six rest days within a 21-day period.

Many of the other London boroughs have seven-day cover from their ward teams.

Islington's Safer Neighbourhoods commander, Chief Inspector Jane Johnson, said last night (Thursday): "The officers are flexible about their shifts and if there's a problem in the evening time, they will cover that.

"But this is not just about patrols. We are looking at long and medium-term problem solving.

"We've got the 24-hour response (emergency) teams to deal with urgent issues.

"But I don't agree it is anyone else's problem other than the Safer Neighbourhoods teams.

"They would have intervened (on the Bemerton) as soon as they came in on Tuesday."

Chief Inspector Johnson added there were no plans to apply for additional funding to increase weekend cover.