

## Head: Improving estates, improving lives

By Martin Stilwell, Chairman, Woking Neighbourhood Watch

Everyone in this country has the right to live in a safe and secure neighbourhood. When the actions of a few criminals or anti-social residents affect that security, and the problem is not dealt with swiftly, it can result in a neighbourhood with deep-seated, long-term problems.

As long ago as the 1870s, social reformer Octavia Hill recognised that if you improved the lives of working people by repairing their housing, they responded well and further improvements could be made. But leaving ~~problems~~ **faults** unrepaired results in further damage, as residents lose interest in their own environment. The area then degenerates into what we now term as a “sink estate”, and it is hard to reverse the downward spiral.

A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure to be involved in a programme of improvements to Walton Court in Maybury. This estate of over 100 apartments has a 60:40 private/social housing mix. The area has had its share of problems, and efforts to fix those in the past have not had a lasting effect.

Led by Woking Police, with the close involvement of New Vision Homes (NVH) and Woking Borough Council, a number of easy and effective improvements are being made to the five blocks that make up the estate. For example, all hedging and bushes have been cut down to waist-height to ensure everyone in the grounds can be seen; the lighting has been upgraded; CCTV cameras will soon be operating; and a wall has been opened up to ~~reveal~~ **remove** an otherwise dark corner of the estate that attracted anti-social behaviour.

In addition to this, all residents' garage doors and “**out-house**” doors are being painted. NVH has contributed the cost of materials, but the labour has been mostly offered by volunteers, led by the excellent Woking-based organisation Barnabas Fresh Start CIC. On the first day, a large contingent of volunteers from Southern Co-op came to help, with some coming from as far away as Kent. Southern Co-op also contributed food and a hamper for a free raffle on the open day the following Saturday.

These volunteers are continuing to work on redecorating the doors and entryways; this is not a quick fix. And it's just the first stage of the project: soon, residents will be able to join a social media group set up for them so they can share posts and news about their community. By getting residents together and more involved in running their estate, the underlying crime, much of it drug-related, should ultimately be eradicated, to the benefit of every honest citizen of Woking.

*To learn more about the activities of Barnabas Fresh Start CIC, visit [freshstartcic.co.uk](http://freshstartcic.co.uk)*