

Cache questions

The police have much to answer for after raiding members of a Luton housing collective in search of drugs. **Tim Malyon** reports

Next Thursday (27 April), Bedfordshire county council will be considering a motion to set up a public inquiry chaired by Michael Mansfield QC into "Bedfordshire police and others' activities" against the Luton-based community dance and housing collective, Exodus. If passed, the motion will establish the precedent of elected councillors rather than the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) supervising investigations into alleged wrong-doing by local police. Exodus refuses to cooperate with the PCA because it considers the practice of the police investigating the police "corrupt and ineffective".

Many "activities" have not been explained, like the non-disclosure of at least 13 police notebooks at one trial involving members of the Exodus collective charged with public order offences. The judge ordered police officers to produce the notebooks and, after two adjournments, one of six months, dismissed all charges when the books had still not been produced. In another case, officers copied crucial information written on a blackboard by a sergeant at Luton police station into their notebooks as evidence. "There's nothing incorrect about that at all," said former divisional chief superintendent Alan Marlow, although it was dismissed as "inappropriate" by the trial judge. Thirty-one different charges against Exodus members have since collapsed. Apart from offences of organising unlicensed parties, to which some pleaded guilty, just one criminal charge was proven, resulting in an £80 fine. The total reported cost of police operations alone was £103,000.

For ten months, NSS has been trying to interview Bedfordshire police to ascertain their side of the story (see NSS, 24 June 1994 and 5 August 1994). We agreed to a request to submit our questions in writing. The interview was promptly cancelled. So we are now publishing what is known, from the trial and other accounts, of one central incident—the alleged discovery of the drug Ecstasy, valued at £2,200, in the room of Paul Taylor, a leading black member of the collective, resulting in charges of possession and supply.

At 8pm on Saturday 30 January 1993, more than 100 police officers raided Long Meadow Farm, near Luton, on a drugs warrant. The farm had been squatted by Exodus and then licensed from the Department of Transport, which owns it.

Police broke into the bungalow where Taylor and three others lived. Luton drugs squad and a large number of other officers searched the premises and left. They found no Ecstasy, just two small caches of cannabis. An electrician was brought on the raid, strange in itself, and he cut off the bungalow's electricity.

Later that evening, at 9.15, according to his notebook, DS Clements entered the blacked-out house with a torch. Clements stayed inside the house for 13 minutes, then called in two colleagues. Within two minutes, one of them had followed Clements' torch to two caches of drugs—one in a coffee tin in Paul Taylor's room, one in his bag alongside his passport, tenancy agreement and DSS forms. "Bingo," defence barrister James Wood commented during the trial. "This case stinks," he continued. "It stinks of a plot." Contrary to normal procedure the search was not witnessed by Taylor, nor any of the legal tenants arrested along with 32 other collective members "to prevent a breach of the peace" and then taken to

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How the Luton drugs squad and other officers could have missed two such obvious hiding places in their earlier search, yet Redfern find them so fast, is difficult to fathom. According to police evidence, Taylor knew in advance that they were coming. But Long Meadow is a 17-acre farm, so why hide drugs in one of the few places where their owner could be positively identified?

Taylor was released at 7.30 the next morning. He was neither interviewed nor charged as a result of the drugs "find". Police said they had had no time, and released him by mistake, although two people were interviewed and charged for minor cannabis possession offences that night. The "mistake" was exacerbated on 4 February when officers returned property to Exodus members at Long Meadow farm, including Taylor's possessions. Taylor was there and signed

for them. Nothing was said to him. The sergeant returning Taylor's belongings was the same custody sergeant who had already let him go once on the night, supposedly by mistake. Taylor was only arrested two weeks after the alleged drugs find, following another police operation against Exodus, after he had gone to the police station to inquire into the arrest of another collective member.

The police fingerprinted neither drugs nor containers. When Exodus demanded tests, there were no prints, not even on the coffee tin, which residents say had been frequently handled. The jury found Taylor not guilty.

Mike Brown, at the time chief inspector with Dunstable police, now retired, supervised an undercover drugs surveillance operation at Exodus dances before the raid on the farm. He states categorically: "There is no evidence that Exodus, in whatever sense one wishes to use that name, or Glenn or Rich [leading collective members], or Paul Taylor in particular, were selling drugs at the raves."

No Bedfordshire police officer has ever been disciplined for the Exodus "activities", not for the blackboard exercise, not for the alleged Ecstasy find, not for the missing notebooks; this despite the head of Luton drugs squad admitting in court to a serious disciplinary offence in his handling of the drugs after they had been brought to Luton police station. Evidence also points to an unexplained "rogue" cache of drugs at the station, origin and destiny unknown.

Deputy chief constable Michael O'Byrne is in charge of complaints and discipline locally. He has a reputation as a strict disciplinarian, famous for the dismissal of a police training recruit for losing his pocket book and covering up the incident. His lack of action requires explanation.

If the drugs charges against Taylor had been proved, it would have resulted in a long prison sentence, and possibly charges for conspiracy to supply drugs against other collective members. "This plant, coupled with other charges against Exodus members, was designed to paint a picture of drugs, nuisance and violence," claims Glenn Jenkins, Exodus spokesperson. "It points to a mechanism of proactive policing whereby politically motivated senior officers can target individuals and destroy movements." A public inquiry is the only way to find the truth. ■