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## FEATURE FOCUS

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### News Analysis: Soul cleansing

By Tom Spender

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Feature Focus

It's a long way from Buenos Aires to Burnt Oak but the trip has definitely been worth it, according to London's top policeman, who saw at first hand the difference young volunteers from as far afield as Argentina are making in Barnet's most-deprived ward.

Last Thursday, Sir John Stevens, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, chatted with residents and teenagers who were painting over graffiti that, until last week, had blighted every single shopfront in Watling Avenue, as part of Soul in the City, an initiative from Christian charity Soul Survivor backed by police and Barnet Council.

As part of the event, 15,000 young volunteers have descended on London and are staying in tent cities in Uxbridge, Chingford and Eltham. Sir John declared the joint initiative to be 'the way of the future'.

"It's all about giving hope to places and regenerating the area. You can see the difference it is making by listening to what people are saying. We've had enough of people daubing doors and making the place unpleasant," he said.

"This is the way of the future. It works. We need more of it in London and God-willing we will get it."

During his walkabout, Sir John was collared by Clara, who lives in Watling Avenue with her three children and said she had to paint her front door every four days because it was so regularly sprayed with graffiti.

"I come home and I don't even recognise my front door. It's a nightmare. On a Friday and Saturday night there is fighting on the street. My kids get scared," she said.

But if graffiti is the disease, committed youngsters such as Jayne Trimble, 21, from Northern Ireland, and John Latham, 16, from Liverpool, who were hard at work repainting a Watling Avenue shopfront, could be the cure.

Jayne said: "I'm loving it and it has a powerful impact on the community. I study near London and it really gets me to think all this graffiti is happening near me."

Jayne and John were among at least 50 youngsters working hard to rid Burnt Oak of its spray-painted blight.

Rob Russell, the council's graffiti officer, said all the graffiti would disappear from Watling Avenue during the two-week clean-up and added that the council's graffiti team would come through the area three times a week in the future.

Councillor Matthew Offord, cabinet member for the environment, said: "Now we need to keep Burnt Oak clean. The community will help before they would have been resigned to the fact that, yet again, someone has graffitied their front door. And the young will say the community is not just elderly people, it's us as well and we want it to stay nice."

Soul Survivor has come to Burnt Oak just months after the borough's first safer neighbourhoods team a dedicated police unit arrived in the area.

Barnet borough commander, Chief Superintendent Mark Ricketts, said: "People are saying it already feels different here and that they are amazed how quickly they are forgetting how bad the area was."

Soul in the City initiatives, run by residents with the help of young volunteers from all over the UK and abroad, are taking place across the borough.

Rachel Harper, who works with Soul Survivor, said the aim of the project was to empower the 750 churches across London involved in Soul and the City so they can keep up the good work once the two-week event is over.

"It's really our hope that these churches that have started things up in the community will continue holding events every year or month," she said.

That's also the Reverend Richard Bodle's hope. His church St Andrew's in Lydford Gardens helped organise a clear-up in Stoneyfields Park and is working with the youth organisation Connexions to provide a community-run youth club in a disused temporary hut in Fairmead Crescent.

"Soul in the City is encouraging churches to be more involved in their communities rather than this just being a one-off event. It's been a really good community event," said the Rev Bodle.

And Miss Harper said that, even though Soul in the City was a Christian event, the volunteers' motivation was primarily to show their faith through actions as well as words and not to convert non-Christians to Christianity.

"We respect and accept that London is made up of many cultures, faiths and people with no faith at all. We don't want to be apologetic about the fact that we are Christians. But we are not selective about which communities we serve and we wouldn't place conditions on those people that we serve. If people question why we are doing this, we would be open about the gospel but there's no way we would force anything on anyone," she said.

Soul in the City events are taking place in the Grahame Park estate; Edgware; the Sweets Way estate in Whetstone; the Strawberry Vale estate in East Finchley; Homeless Action in Barnet in Woodhouse Road, North Finchley and at St John the Baptist church in Wood Street, Barnet.

The volunteers are doing a great job if pensioner Betty Barnett's reaction is anything to go by. Betty, of Manor Road in Barnet, was given a manicure by Soul in the City volunteers at St John the Baptist.

Betty said: "I want to say a big thank you to the volunteers. They had activities for everyone, young and old and they did not miss anything out. There was music for the kids and manicures for the mums. And they gave us all a box containing a candle and a line of verse."