

# Axe over showhouse

NICOLA JENVEY  
PROPERTY EDITOR

**C**RIME in the Upper Highway is leaving devastation, murder, torture and serious injuries in its wake and several families are mourning the deaths of loved ones.

Residents and crime-fighting bodies are seeking solutions, with the police deployment of additional resources in the area having led to some arrests.

In light of these incidents, several estate agents have proposed changes to the accepted marketing campaign for selling homes, believing the showhouse concept might need to be put on hold for a while.

Given that they do not want to be identified as "the crowd that destroyed showhouses", they have asked for anonymity in noting several concerns.

First is that showhouse agents, often women on their own, sit in empty houses for the afternoon with pointer boards advertising their presence.

Cars arrive, bringing strangers to the showhouse, and agents are not given upfront identification on their arrival. Often several groups arrive simultaneously, enhancing the potential for gangs to work together.

"The home's security is seriously compromised for the owner and the agent. While agents might request names and contact



At risk... attacks on estate agents and theft from showhouses have prompted a rethink of marketing methods. Picture: LEON NICHOLAS

numbers, they are not always able to ascertain the information supplied is accurate," said one agent.

Consequently, property owners face the risk of having their properties "cased" by criminals during showhouse days, providing criminals the opportunity to leisurely note security systems, beams, bars and the position of valuables.

Already cases of petty theft have occurred during showhouses, with owners returning to their properties to find cameras, jewellery and other small items removed during the day.

Agents are also at personal risk

of attack during that time.

One agency reported an Upper Highway agent was attacked while putting up showboards.

National detective agency Justicia Investigations has been called in to help identify and apprehend a syndicate targeting estate agents in affluent areas, committing thefts at showhouses.

The company's April newsletter reflected a case in March where a man and a woman were arrested at a drug house after stealing a laptop, jewellery and cellphones from a showhouse.

Held in custody, the couple

admitted to regularly dressing up as wealthy potential buyers and visiting expensive, upper-income neighbourhoods.

Posing as husband and wife, the woman would pretend to be pregnant with her false stomach used to hide the stolen property.

They took turns distracting the agents and searching rooms for valuable items.

Hence, the proposal on the table is for open offices at the agents' offices or a communal meeting place rather than showhouses.

Teams of agents would be available to interview and identify potential clients as well as qualify their affordability.

Copies of identification documents could be recorded for security and those prospective buyers wishing to view properties could then make appointments with the sellers.

"Open offices could be advertised, with homes viewed only by appointment as a proactive approach to preventing attacks on agents and home owners," another agent said.

The procedure would involve agents advertising the property online or in print and receiving a call from the buyer, arranging a meeting or interview in the office and, once the agent has qualified the client's needs, compiling an appropriate portfolio and making the requisite appointments to view homes.