

Community leadership approaches to tackling street crime

The United Estates of Wythenshawe (UEW) group in south Manchester is engaged in tackling street crime via transformative work with young people in Benchill, one of the UK's most deprived wards. The group has developed an entrepreneurial approach to providing a gym and a range of popular activities for young people, and the income they generate enables them to act independently of any grants system. The group engaged with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in a development project aiming to share these approaches with similar neighbourhoods in the Midlands and the north of England.

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- The communities that took part in the project were keen to tackle the considerable impact of street crime in their neighbourhoods. However, they often felt unrecognised and marginalised by statutory bodies.
- The neighbourhood organisations were prepared to work creatively to challenge the behaviour of local young people and to encourage lasting change in them. This was often achieved through older mentors who led by example. A number of the organisations were motivated by faith.
- Community leaders lived locally and were in sympathy with local cultures. While this may explain their local effectiveness, paradoxically it can also heighten the suspicion with which they are viewed by outside organisations. Such obstacles risk wasting valuable creative local energies.
- Coming together periodically to share experiences and receive support was very important for the neighbourhood groups, which were all working under pressure in very difficult circumstances. The availability of sympathetic mentoring also helped to overcome the hurdles they faced in dealings with external organisations.
- The experiences revealed by the project suggest that government could help to support and empower such groups by encouraging exchange visits, networking opportunities and mentoring.
- Statutory bodies working with community groups in this field should find ways to reduce possible misunderstandings that can arise from differences in culture or class.

Background

Over the past few years, concern has grown that, despite the best efforts of regeneration professionals and the criminal justice system, deprived neighbourhoods in the UK continue to suffer from the effects of criminality and anti-social behaviour. This development project explored credible alternatives to street crime that have been generated by neighbourhood leaders strongly rooted in the lifestyle, culture and class of their communities.

In recent years Government has launched many initiatives aimed at tackling crime and antisocial behaviour in neighbourhoods, including: the Respect Action Plan, the Together Campaign, the Home Office Round table on guns, gangs and knives, and the Connected Fund. In 2008, a Crime and Communities review will be published by the Cabinet Office. Many other agencies, both statutory and voluntary (the Youth Justice Board, Crime Concern, schools, community safety partnerships, the Rainer Foundation, local churches to name only a few), have also worked tirelessly over the years to tackle these issues. More broadly, the Government, via several initiatives, is strengthening citizen engagement and community empowerment.

This project focused on 'home-grown' solutions to these issues that are built on the experience, understanding and skills of residents who live in neighbourhoods and experience daily the problems arising from anti-social behaviour, violent crime and drugs. The project explored not only how these skills can be developed, but also examined the misunderstandings that can occur between these innovative groups and other local stakeholders. The project puts forward recommendations about what more could be done by the statutory sector to encourage and support innovative community approaches of this kind.

In 2005, Greg Davis of the UEW approached JRF about the transformative work UEW were carrying out with young people in Wythenshawe's Benchill ward. After commissioning a short scoping report, JRF funded a development project with the aim of helping UEW to:

- develop materials that explain their approach;
- invite other neighbourhoods, funders and regeneration managers to attend 'Seeing is Believing' visits in Wythenshawe;
- establish a mentoring role with a number of other neighbourhoods.

This summary reviews the project, and draws out some implications for policy and practice.

The United Estates of Wythenshawe (UEW)

The Wythenshawe estate was described as the largest garden estate in Europe when it was first built during the 1920s. However, like many similar estates across the UK, by the 1990s a series of social and economic problems (low educational attainment, youth unemployment, drugs and crime) were seriously undermining the previously positive image of the area. Despite regeneration efforts spearheaded by Manchester City Council, and involving other statutory and voluntary bodies in Wythenshawe, the effects of street crime continued to be felt in certain parts of the estate.

In this context, a group of local leaders decided to act. Over a number of years they converted a disused chapel into a centre housing a gym and other social enterprises including sports, hairdressing, therapeutic massage, a second-hand clothes shop, and a street dance facility. They involved some of the neighbourhood's

most disruptive youth in the construction of the centre, thereby giving them a stake in the scheme. The building is one of the few public buildings in the area that has not been vandalised. The leaders led by example to show young people who felt it was 'cool to be bad' that there are credible alternatives to anti-social behaviour. They generated income from the gym and the other social enterprises, so that they were not dependent on grants from the public purse. This also helped develop pride and a sense of independence.

The success of this unusual neighbourhood initiative rests on a number of factors:

- the leaders, who live in the area and run local businesses, took a very confident entrepreneurial approach;
- they had empathy with young people at the margins, perhaps mirroring their own experience, and showed themselves as willing not just to engage but to lead by example, and where necessary to be tough;
- some of the founding group shared a faith, and their church was willing to take some risks and offer the group a lease on one of their buildings;
- the leaders who came forward describe themselves as the 'real community leaders'. This expresses not just oneness with the cultural and class roots shared by Wythenshawe residents, but also a confidence about their standing in the community, and their ability to command respect amongst local young people.

The mentoring phase of the project

One of the leading members of UEW, Greg Davis, worked with regeneration consultant Jenny Lynn to make contact with other neighbourhoods in the Midlands and the north of England who might be interested in the approaches developed in Wythenshawe. After some scoping, work began with organisations based in the following four areas:

- *The Broxtowe Estate in Nottingham*: here, a partnership organisation with a small staff faced problems of anti-social behaviour. Recently, a young man from the estate had started a successful youth evening in the community centre.
- *The Stubbin Estate in Sheffield*: The Stubbin Neighbourhood Association was set up in 2004 to tackle local frustrations about crime, drug use, and unresponsive services, and the estate is now part of the Guide Neighbourhoods Programme.
- *Moss Side in Manchester*: this is an area that has struggled for years to overcome its image as a hotspot for crime and drugs. A prominent local group, CARISMA, was interested in advice about its plans to buy and convert a local building for community use.
- *The Criminal Information Bureau (CIB) in North Liverpool*: CIB is a web-based information and advice agency, set up in 2005, with a focus on rehabilitation for ex-prisoners and intervention work to prevent young people going down the wrong road.

There were two stages in the important process of building up trust with these neighbourhoods. First, Greg (accompanied by Jenny) visited all the areas to get to know the issues. The meetings were informal and participants shared stories about, for example, changes in working-class neighbourhoods, young people who had lost their way, how people had stood up to local bullies, and how people sometimes felt unsupported in their efforts by their local authority.

Second, visits were also organised to Wythenshawe itself. Typically, these informal visits would include a chance to see the gym (and participate in activities there), a trip round the estate, a presentation from Greg and colleagues, and plenty of opportunity to exchange ideas. The aim was to send people away with a sense of optimism about what was possible, and a feeling of confidence that UEW had been built by people very like themselves.

Not all the estates were ready to act on the insights received during these visits. UEW's entrepreneurial approach was seen as challenging by some groups used to receiving their funding via grants. The groups in Nottingham and Sheffield both felt that they were unable to embark on a social enterprise approach immediately. However, in North Liverpool the head of CIB, Bob Croxton, met Greg to discuss ways of tackling the increasingly violent gun culture that had taken hold there (shortly after that meeting 11-year-old Rhys Jones was shot dead in nearby Croxteth). Bob and Greg visited three churches that might serve as local UEW-type centres.

In Moss Side, CARISMA had taken the initiative and approached UEW for help in shaping their ideas about a social enterprise venture, triggered by the possibility of acquiring a former pub. The mentoring sessions with UEW were used to brainstorm possible uses for the building and to think about key factors to be borne in mind, such as the importance of involving children likely to cause trouble, how to select activities in line with the culture of the area, and, most important of all, how the activities could become self-financing.

Lessons from the mentoring process

The mentoring process highlighted the importance of keeping such meetings relaxed, friendly and informal, and allowing time for trust to develop. Stories were a useful way to share experience and learning, and the mentors found that summarising the discussion, asking key questions, and introducing ideas from elsewhere also helped. Equally important was the relationship that developed between the outside facilitator Jenny Lynn and the host organisation UEW. This was based on mutual empathy, understanding and respect (again, this does not come automatically and needs time to develop) and a flexible way of working together to share, challenge and assess progress. Skilled outside support of this kind was a valuable resource.

The value of events, networking and developing a culture of mutual support

The project concluded with a lively conference – entitled *Street Peace 2007* – attended by all but one of the communities already mentioned, other groups from these same cities, and some neighbourhood groups from other cities (Birmingham, Trafford and Newcastle). All of the communities face severe problems, many linked to drugs. The event underlined a key issue – that without strong input from communities themselves, there can be no lasting solution to these problems.

The two-day event opened with an airing of some of the problems common to all these neighbourhoods: out of control young people; drug dealing; gang culture and intimidation; weapons and violent crime. Other problems or barriers included: insufficient funding for local groups; lack of understanding or empathy from partner organisations, including local authorities; the negative attitude of the media; and the difficulty of co-ordinating statutory services in the neighbourhood.

By the end of the event, the neighbourhoods had begun to put together a manifesto suggesting how peace could be returned to their streets. Within this, key, central roles were allocated to the community. The key issues covered by the manifesto were:

- Positive action, and individual and collective responsibility, from residents.
- Credible alternatives to gang culture, including positive opportunities to divert young people from drugs and crime.
- Better services, with better co-ordination. Amongst these, well-functioning schools with skilled staff were rated highly.
- Better support, understanding and resources for community groups that seek to tackle these issues.

The need for better support, understanding and resources underlines one of the most important

lessons from the whole project. Community groups, who may have the clearest understanding of the issues can, paradoxically, find themselves shunned by statutory partners, who can at times show little understanding of different class values or work styles.

The event demonstrated the ability of communities to think analytically about the problems of street crime, and to develop realistic solutions. It also illustrated how important such events are in developing mutual support, joint learning and putting together common strategies.

Key lessons and policy implications

The project worked with only a small sample of neighbourhoods, although these illustrated a variety of circumstances and cultures. Despite this variety, the participating neighbourhoods shared much common ground and there was little disagreement on the key lessons emerging from the study. These are summarised below:

- Despite the efforts of Government and a range of statutory and voluntary agencies, many communities still suffer from the impact of antisocial behaviour and violent street crime.
- At the same time, residents' groups in some of the worst affected areas have the knowledge, skills and entrepreneurial ability to have a significant impact on these problems. These groups therefore represent a valuable, even central, resource to be harnessed to the fight against street crime.
- Perhaps because of different culture or work styles, statutory bodies can be suspicious of such groups, and reluctant to fund them or accept them as partners. As well as considering any risks involved, the study suggests that statutory agencies in regeneration, education, youth work and the criminal justice system should consider the positive benefits that could result from working with community groups such as these.

- Better collaboration might be achieved through joint facilitated events that bring together participants from the neighbourhood and the statutory sectors. Organisations like Common Purpose might have a valuable role to play in such arrangements.
- A number of the neighbourhoods stressed the importance of better understanding and collaboration with local schools, particularly around ways of handling children with challenging behaviour. Collaboration with neighbourhood organisations with the right skills could prevent unnecessary exclusions.

This study raises a number of challenges for policy-makers. A key first step is to see working class neighbourhoods in a more positive light. The further challenge is to create space, all over the country, for the energy and enterprise of groups like those featured in the study; and to support these efforts by helping to develop a positive culture of mutual support.

About the study

The project was carried out by Greg Davis of UEW and Jenny Lynn, an independent neighbourhood renewal consultant.

For further information

The full report, **Community leadership approaches to tackling street crime** by Jenny Lynn, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

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