


Helping hands

A scheme to cut crime in a community in Merseyside by enlisting the help of the people who live there has been singled out as best practice by the Home Office and Audit Commission. Carol Jenkins reports.

 The feeling that crime and disorder is spiralling out of control can have a devastating effect on communities and drive a wedge between police and public.

It often takes something as minor as kids congregating on streets corners, excess noise, petty crime and graffiti on walls to destabilise communities – leaving residents feeling powerless and embattled. This low-level nuisance crime can escalate into more serious crime resulting in damage to people and property.

Intimidation

Eighteen months ago, residents in Orrell Park – an estate of privately-owned houses in an area of Merseyside – were beginning to feel under siege from unruly youngsters who were physically and verbally abusive to anyone who challenged their behaviour. Even the local youth worker had withdrawn from the community because of the intimidation. As the days turned into months, the behaviour worsened with the youths setting fire to rubbish bins and vandalising cars. The situation came to a head when a girl fell under a train and lost her leg as a result of their actions.

Inspector Geoff Cheshire, of Merseyside Police, realised something needed to be done when he was summoned to a meeting in a resident's house and the living room was packed-full of residents demanding answers.

'This was a community that had lost all pride and confidence in itself as a result of what had

happened. We realised we would need to persuade residents to step up and take ownership of the problem if we were going to have any hope of restoring some sort of order. After it all it's the residents who live there day in day out and they know the problems better than anybody. How arrogant would it be for me who does not even live here to impose a solution on them? All I would be doing is disenfranchising them further,' says Insp Cheshire.

Dramatic reduction

The programme of work, called the Community Template for Action, devised by Insp Cheshire, began exactly a year ago. In that time, it has transformed the lives

of everybody in Orrell Park, including the youngsters. It has also brought about some dramatic reduction in crime and increased public confidence in local police. In just one year, crime fell by 13 per cent; burglary fell by 25 per cent and robbery by 41 per cent. Car theft fell by 52 per cent; crime and disorder reduced by 22 per cent. A satisfaction survey carried out among residents revealed a 100 per cent improvement in the number of people who were satisfied with the police.

The project began with a high-profile police presence in the area for two weeks in which officers stopped local young people, took descriptions of them and their clothing. This sent out a

strong message to them that they were being watched and that their behaviour would not be tolerated. Insp Cheshire described this as 'a deliberate ploy to go in hard with the youths and give them a short sharp shock'.

Officers also made sure they spoke to local residents to reassure them and keep them informed of their work. After two weeks the police withdrew and sent the local youth worker into the area to work with the youngsters to try and develop a sense of community responsibility into them. Events such as an outward bound trip were organised in which officers took part as participants and not leaders to try and bond with the young people.



Clarifying issues with local residents helps them solve problems



Police officers working with the community has led to crime reduction

Residents' group

At the same time, officers went back to the residents group and asked them to gather together 24 local people whose voices were not usually heard. The 24 residents were invited along to the local leisure club to attend a focus group.

Key representatives from the area such as the council's anti-social behaviour unit, youth workers and the Primary Care Trust were invited but told they were not to speak – just listen.

Insp Cheshire explains why he set very specific terms of reference for the meeting.

'I made sure everybody who attended knew that this wasn't about proportioning blame and that it was to be a positive event that was focussed on the future and not the past.'

Residents were split into four groups and asked the question 'what issues do you think are affecting the quality of life in Orrell Park?' They were given 20 minutes to highlight issues and jot them down on sticky notes. After 20 minutes, Insp Cheshire stuck the notes onto flip charts and grouped them into categories, making detailed notes of every issue that was raised. Officers then took the notes and graphed them, ending up with columns so

that they could identify what the most serious problems were that needed the most urgent attention

This was whittled down to ten key problems. Each group was given two or three of these problems to look at and decide for themselves the most appropriate course of action. They were also asked to assign the various agencies to each task. Insp Cheshire encouraged residents to identify which tasks that they should undertake.

Once the problems and suggested actions were identified – officers asked for six weeks to build up a Community Template for Action on the best way forward. This was published on the internet and circulated among residents and local counsellors. A 12-month programme of work then began which included:

- The residents committee wrote to parents to get them on board and agree to a minimum standard of acceptable behaviour for everyone to follow. This helped reduce youth disorder
- Police worked with the local crime reduction partnership to persuade them to subsidise security lighting for the backs of houses to make residents feel safer. The residents were

charged a nominal fee of £10 for each light. The lights were fitted by a group which takes young people off the streets and gives them employment

- Residents secured funding from the Primary Care Trust to buy poop-a-scoopers to encourage dog owners to clear up after their dogs
- Funding was secured for the local community centre to employ its own youth worker. The community centre has proved such a success with the young people that it is now oversubscribed
- Police allocated extra resources in the area on bonfire night to prevent firework-related crime and disorder
- Police used designated area legislation contained in the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 for the first time in the county which prevents groups of people hanging around if it is proved they are committing anti-social behaviour
- Merseyside Police teamed up with British Transport Police to step up extra patrols in and around the railway station where youngsters were congregating and intimidating passengers
- Police executed drugs warrants to rid the area of drugs

As a result of this programme of work, the residents group have achieved such a high status in the community for their work that they received funding to repair local parkland. They are now routinely consulted by local councillors for their views.

Encouraged by the success of Orrell Park, Insp Cheshire launched the template in three very different areas. Two out of the three areas responded positively to the project and are well under way to emulating the success of Orrell Park. However, one area refused to take part. They said it was the job of the police alone to solve crime and disorder and that they should not get involved.

Undeterred, Insp Cheshire gives two key pieces of advice to other forces who want to introduce the project into their community policing model:

- 1) Be generous with your praise to residents. The key to the success of this project is the raising of the status of the community representatives. All things come from them and respect should go back to them.
- 2) Be prepared to respond to local need and resist temptation to impose your own solutions. You have to be prepared to balance your commitments to key performance indicators with the needs of the community.

The Community Template for Action has received positive feedback from a number of external organisations because of the fact it is so innovative by both the Home Office and the Audit Commission.

'It's nice to receive external recognition for our work but the most important thing is that it is making a difference to the lives of the residents. People are now taking a sense of pride in the community. Instead of a climate of fear and mistrust there is now respect among neighbours and willingness by everybody to get together and try to make the area a better place to live,' adds Insp Cheshire.

