

# Crime Prevention: training communities

Leslie Silverlock and Sarah Williams describe what is needed to train and empower local people in community crime prevention strategies and planning.

Current attempts to drive down crime have generated their own mantras: *'Putting the community in the driving seat'*, *'neighbourhood renewal'*, *'active communities'*, *'involving the people closest to the problem in the solution'*, *'sustaining community safety interventions'*, - some of these phrases even have new government departments named after them!

The HMIC report *Calling Time on Crime* states that community engagement is vital if crime prevention initiatives are to be sustained. The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal makes it clear that engendering community confidence through positive action and 'quick wins' is vital.

Easier said than done. Community development even in healthy areas is a sensitive and skilled activity at the best of times. In neighbourhoods blighted by burglary, vehicle crime, drug dealing, neighbour nuisance, anti-social behaviour, where tenants stay locked in, come out fighting, or desire to move as soon as possible, sustaining local action groups is nearly impossible. There are, however, some promising signs, and tried and tested approaches that work.

## 'What Works'

- In Mansfield the Neighbourhood Safety project has lifted a whole area out of the doldrums. The local police officer, community worker, community safety manager and committed residents formed a team and set about getting Sitex removed from the boarded up houses, conducting security audits on vacant properties and establishing a simpler system for reporting non-urgent incidents.
- In Chester they set about getting the steel shutters off the shop fronts and finding out if the CCTV scheme was producing any real results.
- In Birmingham the police spent months drawing up a protocol for all the agencies involved to get abandoned and burnt out vehicles removed within 24 hours; in the process they discovered a technique for removing these degenerative eyesores within 30 minutes!
- In Wolverhampton they created a 'virtual beat' so that three neighbourhoods devastated by crime could be linked together and crime reductions demonstrated to keep hope and spirits among the local activists alive.
- In Brighton they moved the foyer so that 'fixers' couldn't hide from the cameras and continue to

abuse a whole block of flats, driving the residents out; now they have to find a more comprehensive solution to the 'druggies' they've moved.

- In Stoke a school swimming pool, opened for the first time in the school holidays and supervised by the local community at a cost of £3,000, saved the traditional £20,000 spent by public services each summer on repairing site vandalism.
- Coventry's burglary scheme at Stoke Aldermoor and the Four Closes has made the community the starting point for involvement and action, ensuring that all the housing, police, health, local authority and community leaders are agreed and moving in the same direction together.

The stories are legion, but how have they done it? Why can't everybody involve local people in the solutions that are rebuilding their lives? What have the good news stories got in common?

## Common themes

First of all they have a dedicated worker, somebody whose job it is to build the capacity of the local community to tackle their own problems. In Blyth it's a Neighbourhood Warden, in Aberdare it's the 'Mothers in Action' leader, in Runcorn for 'Girls Let Loose' it was the charismatic young female youth worker, in Cardiff it's the copper who organises the Somali football league, in Falmouth it was the health visitor. This person is the driver, the conductor, but guards against being the egotistical glory seeker.

What these energisers do is create community champions, building the self-esteem of the people closest to the problem. They create what we call 'active ripples' using good quality, well-established community development techniques.

They also seek to avoid the oft-repeated 'cycle of disillusionment' so prevalent in public consultations.

The community needs results now, not when the local authority or criminal justice system can fit an extra plan into its strategic cycle. Don't start this process if you haven't identified the people, time and resources to carry the whole scheme through to impact and results. You will also need good 'community' trainers to stimulate ideas, build confidence and develop local people's capacity to take action for themselves.

To begin with we try to work with and train local people alongside their various, trusted 'professionals'; this might be a community beat officer, safety officer, neighbourhood warden, drug prevention scheme worker, health visitor or housing officer. Co-training

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in this way helps the 'professionals' to see things from the locals' point of view, and helps the locals to understand firstly that support is available when they meet the inevitable blocks, and secondly how much collective power and authority they can exercise if they work together in association.

Training together like this also works because after working on case studies and problems, local people leave the seminars with real action plans and timetables, and support structures to back their ideas. Assembling together again within three to four months enables them to assess progress, work collaboratively to solve problems, begin to measure impact, and celebrate successes, a process which in itself adds value and momentum by stimulating a public relations and marketing approach to local achievements.

In the event that we can't get the professionals to come to the training with their local activists (which is rare), then we try to work with several different local groups together so that they can influence, support and stimulate one another.

These techniques also work because if you involve the people closest to the action as part of the solution there is a chance of sustainability. In Islington, Simon Harding even formed a focus group of muggers to get the inside line on street robbery! And more policy makers need to think about paying local people - we don't work for nothing.

## Community mechanisms

If a training programme isn't possible we use existing meetings and groups; there is often no need to set up a whole new set of training mechanisms when the playgroup, women's group, men's club, sports teams and youth club already meet regularly and might be honoured to be asked about their ideas. Nor should young people be overlooked (often the case): they see three times more crime than anybody else and are more often the

victims than the perpetrators; they will take anything, especially responsibility. Examine what Youth Action, Youth Inclusion Programmes and CSVs Barclays New Futures training and support programmes are achieving.

Another mild form of arrogance you may have to overcome in seeking to train and empower local people involves county, district and borough councils and how they traditionally operate. What all of these structures ignore is a nationwide political mechanism much closer to local people which, to date, has largely been underestimated and underused - town, community and parish councils; who have information, power and money and are very close to the 'action', more so than most 'authorities' with the possible exception of housing associations and schools.

Crime Concern teaches local groups of professionals, partnerships and community leaders the techniques outlined in this article through its action learning and planning programmes: 'Creating Confident Communities', 'Early Action on Crime', 'Young People as Partners in Local Action', 'Community Champions', and 'Communities Against Drugs', and in partnership with the National Tenants Resource Centre. A comprehensive publication 'Reducing Neighbourhood Crime' (cost £25) is also available from Crime Concern Trust Limited, Beaver House, 147-150 Victoria Road, Swindon SN1 3UY for those people who are unable to establish a training programme of their own. Every course delegate also receives a manual packed with ideas about what works, and planning sheets to use in involving and teaching others, all copyright free to enable communities to make a difference for themselves.

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