

'Togetherness'? Tackling anti-social behaviour through community engagement

Kathryn Farrow and David Prior look at the relationship between taking on ASB and promoting civil renewal.

A good deal of commentary on the Government's approach to tackling anti-social behaviour has focused on the appropriateness and effectiveness of specific enforcement powers: ASBOs, Dispersal Orders, closure of crack houses and so on (see, for example, Burney 2005). Yet a major part of government strategy looks to local communities to play an active role in reducing anti-social behaviour – the idea of community engagement as a means of achieving policy goals not only runs through much Ministerial discourse, it underpins the 'Together' campaign formerly run by the Home Office, now transferred to the new Department of Communities and Local Government, which is supporting initiatives across the country (www.together.gov.uk).

In line with the principles of civil renewal, the promotion of community engagement in strategies to reduce crime and disorder is aimed at creating a new relationship between citizens, communities and the agencies of crime control, based on trust and

different kinds of initiatives were being developed to tackle them. Thus, in the first neighbourhood, officially perceived as the 'worst' in terms of levels of crime and anti-social behaviour, a neighbourhood safety project based on principles of community participation was in place, operating alongside fairly intensive police interventions deploying the range of ASB powers. In the second, a residents group had been established and was developing a partnership approach with local agencies (local authority, police, voluntary organisations), in which a dedicated neighbourhood police officer and a voluntary sector community worker were key players. In the third, a 'Neighbourhood Forum' was taking a lead role in community development activities; this comprised local residents and had official status in the local authority's decision making process.

What, then, did we learn about community engagement at neighbourhood level? (For a fuller discussion of the research findings, see Prior, Farrow, Spalek and Barnes 2006 in press.)

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public confidence (Prior 2005). The claim is that this will lead to less crime and anti-social behaviour and stronger, more cohesive communities.

As part of the Civil Renewal Research Programme funded by the Home Office, we set out to test, in a very preliminary way, the relationship between initiatives addressing anti-social behaviour and the potential for civil renewal in a large urban district, where the development of multi-agency responses to anti-social behaviour was being prioritised. The district, 'Greenhill', is part of a much larger metropolitan area, has a population of 107,000, 46 per cent of whom are from minority ethnic communities (mainly South Asian Muslim), and has very high levels of multiple deprivation.

We organised discussion groups, interviewed people and attended meetings in three separate neighbourhoods in different parts of Greenhill. Each of these was facing specific local problems involving anti-social behaviour and, in each,

First, in all three, poverty and deprivation combined with a history of under-investment by public and private sectors to create a very difficult environment for community engagement. A poor quality of life, lack of trust in the public agencies and a frequently expressed desire to move elsewhere, meant that there was little capacity for initiatives which put responsibility for action onto local citizens themselves. It generated, among the majority, a culture of pessimism which led people to doubt that anything could change for the better. It also raised, for us, the question whether 'tackling anti-social behaviour' should really be the major priority for public policy in the area.

Second, where indications of progress did exist, they were fragile and tended to involve a very small number of people. Generally, social networks were weak and there was little experience of collective action. In the neighbourhood where most progress had been made, this was due to the efforts of two

or three residents from the Neighbourhood Forum who had simply set out to organise small-scale activities for local young people and had gradually begun to gain the trust and support both of the young people and their parents. This had been done largely independently of the public agencies, albeit it with their recognition and support. By contrast, in the neighbourhood where an 'official' neighbourhood safety project had been introduced, involvement by residents was minimal to the point of raising doubts about the project's continuing viability.

Third, there were profound differences regarding ways of responding to the perceived anti-social behaviour of young people, in particular between advocates of enforcement and proponents of long term preventive work. In the neighbourhood with the emerging residents group and some partnership action with local service deliverers, we found evidence of substantial distrust between adult residents and young people in the area; and further distrust from the young people in the police, who (with the exception of the one Neighbourhood Police Officer) they saw as harassing and victimizing them. In areas such as this, we believe there is a risk of young people, as a social group, being made to feel subject to controls that exclude them from ordinary, everyday social life, thereby exacerbating existing feelings of alienation and detachment (Squires and Stephen 2005).

Fourth, the whole issue of trust and distrust appeared hugely significant, and operated across numerous dimensions: between citizens and public agencies; between young and old; between different ethnic groups; and simply between individual neighbours. Nearly all our respondents viewed trust as a vital ingredient in community engagement, but how do you build trust? At a basic level, our evidence suggests it takes both time and some sort of shared or community focused activity, for example, developing an Asian girls group, organising day trips for children and parents, 'officials' becoming part of local neighbourhood life, such as community caretakers or Neighbourhood Police Officers. There seemed little doubt that heavy-handed 'enforcement' of anti-social behaviour powers, whilst welcomed by residents on occasions, was destructive of trust in the longer term.

Fifth, in Greenhill, as elsewhere, the challenge of engaging the South Asian Muslim communities faced both the legacy of persistently high levels of deprivation and the resulting frustration increasingly voiced by second or third generation British Asian citizens (McGhee 2005). There is a complex issue here concerning the strong bonding relationships within these communities but a relative lack of connection to the formal agencies of governance. A number of respondents suggested that the conventional mechanisms of participation were generally unsuccessful with these Asian Muslim communities (but then they were not noticeably successful with the white communities either). Heightened tensions arising from the association of terrorism with these communities and their

experiences of increasing Islamophobia in Britain made the whole process of engagement in civil and political life extremely difficult.

Sixth, some public policies had themselves impacted negatively on community capacity, for example, the design of housing estates that offered few shared public resources, housing policies that resettled people from other areas with little attention to potential barriers to their integration, and initiatives with short-term funding that delivered very little lasting change. This left a legacy of pessimism and distrust in the willingness and ability of public agencies to act in the best interests of local neighbourhoods.

What is the way forward? Our research suggested that 'capacity building' must be a core objective but that for it to be successful a commitment to long-term developmental work is required – work that would take place in very localised contexts and would gradually construct the kinds of relationships of trust and mutuality between fellow community members that could support a capacity for engagement. There is a need to overcome bureaucratic service delivery and attitudes which suggested a view of residents as 'problems' rather than citizens. Are local service providers able to work with residents in ways that concede power without being threatened by local agendas and volunteer activists?

We concluded that not only are there no quick or easy answers to the question of how to engage local communities, but that the way forward must be gradually negotiated and constructed as a series of specific localised strategies to fit the needs and characteristics of individual neighbourhoods. Trust and engagement at neighbourhood level cannot be created by a single generalised or uniformly applied strategy.

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