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Community engagement: practical lessons from a pilot project

Deena Mistry

Although engaging local people in activities to make communities safer is not new, it has become an increasingly significant part of government policy in the last five years. The recent review of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998¹ recommended that Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) “consult and engage with their local communities on a regular and ongoing basis.” This proposal puts people at “the heart of public services by passing more power, control and influence to local communities.” The Neighbourhood Policing Programme² is another example of the drive for more community involvement in making neighbourhoods safer, using community intelligence to make policing more responsive to citizens’ needs through dedicated and accessible Neighbourhood Policing Teams.

This report is intended as a resource for practitioners setting up mechanisms to engage local communities in community safety activities. It draws on lessons from a pilot community engagement project.

Key points

When setting up community engagement mechanisms, practitioners may like to consider the following points.

- Clearly define what is meant by ‘community engagement’ and ensure that this is understood by all stakeholders at the outset.
- Consider using a combination of inward-facing and outward-facing methods to obtain a broader picture of the issues that need addressing.
- Inward-facing methods involve engaging local communities in meetings with service providers to tackle local crime and disorder. Alternatively, outward-facing methods involve engaging with local communities outside of formal meetings. The effectiveness of each approach will depend on being clear about *who* is to be engaged and *why*.
- Define clear accountability structures for community engagement. Create capacity for communities to get involved so that they are able to hold service providers to account.
- Effective organisation of community engagement processes is essential for gaining maximum involvement. Be realistic about the time and resources needed to achieve effective community engagement as well as what can be achieved overall.

Background

Recognising the importance of involving communities in tackling crime and disorder, an East Midlands city has formed nine Community Safety Groups (CSGs) to engage local people with relevant service providers in order to identify and tackle issues in their local area³. In April 2004 Government Office for the East Midlands commissioned a project through which three different consultants worked with the CSGs for one year to enhance the level of community engagement within these groups and support them in identifying and tackling local problems.

1. <<http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/partnerships60.doc>> (3 January 2007).
 2. Through the Neighbourhood Policing Programme, the Government, working in partnership with the Association of Chief Police Officers, the National Centre for Policing Excellence and the Association of Police Authorities, aims to set up Neighbourhood Policing Teams in every neighbourhood across England and Wales by 2008.
 3. The average population in each of the nine areas is 29,655 residents.

A process evaluation of this project highlighted a number of practical lessons, which are discussed in this report:

- the definition of community engagement;
- clarifying who to engage and why;
- methods of community engagement;
- accountability and community engagement; and
- maximising community involvement.

The definition of community engagement

Practice message:

- Ensure that 'community engagement' is defined and understood by all stakeholders at the outset.

Defining community engagement is challenging; it can mean quite different things in different circumstances ranging from the simple provision of information and consultation through to the delegation of power and control to citizens (Arnstein, 1969). Without a clear and common understanding of what community engagement means within a given context, activities may be pitched at an inappropriate level of engagement and therefore be ineffective.

A clear definition is essential to assess the degree of community engagement that is to be achieved. 'Bums on seats' may be one way to assess the extent of community engagement, but will not be appropriate in all cases. Performance measures need to relate directly to the original definition.

In this project it was left to the consultants to explore with the CSGs the definition of 'community engagement'. This resulted, however, in a lack of clarity among both the consultants and the individual CSGs about their guiding principles and remit.

Clarifying who to engage and why

Practice messages:

- Ensure that the aims of any engagement are clear.
- Be clear about *who* should be involved and *why*.

In this project, the purpose of engaging local people with the CSGs was to enhance knowledge about crime and disorder problems in the local area and enable service providers to involve residents in problem solving. The aim of any engagement activity directly informs both the choice of who to engage and the methods that should be used. As a result, it is important that practitioners attempting to engage the community have a common understanding of its purpose. Likewise, community members themselves need to appreciate the value of their contribution and what is expected of them.

It is crucial to be clear about *who* to engage from local communities, and *why*. For example some CSGs tried to involve local residents in meetings while others only involved community representatives such as existing community associations. Both can be valid approaches; the key is to consider the purpose of the engagement in order to ensure the most appropriate approach.

Engaging with other community organisations

CSG members in Area Sand⁴ were concerned that the same community representatives attended different types of community meetings, thus duplicating discussions. This CSG therefore assigned service-provider representatives from the CSG to attend relevant community meetings, such as the Tenants and Residents' Association, in order to feed information back and forth between the CSG and those meetings. Although, in theory, this appeared to be a good method of increasing the two-way flow of information, the consultant felt that in practice it did not work well as there was no formal structure in place to ensure that messages were actually passed between the groups.

4. The nine CSGs have been anonymised in this report.

Area Stone adopted a similar method. This CSG found that other community groups were responsive and helpful, especially in identifying problem areas. The difference was that in Area Stone they were clearer about the purpose of CSG attendance at other groups' meetings than in Area Sand.

The evaluation found that where CSGs were successful in linking with other community groups as a means of gaining 'community' input they had first:

- identified which community groups to work with and been clear as to the purpose of the relationship;
- agreed a formal means for communicating information between the CSG and relevant community group(s), frequency of meetings, methods of sharing information and defined responsibilities;
- established clear accountability structures to the community group(s) so that these groups could hold the CSG to account for their actions.

When inviting local residents to take part, the consultants and CSGs did not use systematic methods to decide who to approach. Instead they asked 'anyone and everyone'. While in certain groups this still resulted in the community being poorly represented at the CSG, in one particular group the local resident membership grew so much that the meetings became unwieldy. *Too much* community involvement in this CSG made the group unmanageable.

The evaluation findings suggest three questions to ask when deciding whether to engage residents in these forums.

- Should residents be involved in the groups at all and why?
- Who from the community should be involved to make the groups effective?
- If residents do get involved, *how* should they be involved?

Methods of engagement

Practice messages:

- Community engagement can be achieved through either inward-facing or outward-facing approaches. The effectiveness of each approach will depend on who is to be engaged and why.
- The methods of engagement need to be tailored to its purpose.
- A combination of inward-facing and outward-facing methods will help to obtain a broader picture of the issues that need addressing.

Two main approaches were used by the consultants to improve community engagement in the CSGs; they can be described as *inward-facing* and *outward-facing* methods.

Inward-facing methods

The inward-facing approach aimed to encourage local people to attend the CSG itself and, once there, to engage them in tackling local crime and disorder. The inward-facing approach can bring indirect accountability to the CSGs, enabling residents to question service providers about the problems in the area and what they are doing about them.

In practice, the CSGs adopting this approach found it difficult to attract people to meetings. Obtaining a good representation of residents across the community was even harder.

Invitation letters

Some CSGs wrote letters of invitation to local residents, advertising the group and providing details of their next meeting. The aim was to encourage attendance from a wider cross-section of the community. Although this approach sparked some interest in the next meeting, the 'new recruits' had the same characteristics as those referred to as 'usual suspects' (i.e. White, over-50, retired and usually involved in other community groups) and the method failed to attract a wider cross-section of the community. This approach may have been more effective if the groups had targeted their population and followed up their invitation letters.

To overcome the lack of interest in meetings and make the agenda more interesting, one consultant worked with the CSG to set up theme-based meetings on topics that might stimulate interest among residents to attend.

Themed meetings

Area Sky held a meeting with an anti-social behaviour theme in response to worries about it within the area. The meeting was attended by service providers and local residents who were put into mixed groups of community members and agency representatives. Each group was given a map of the local area and asked to flag up problem areas and identify solutions to the problems. The interactive nature of the event gave residents an opportunity to contribute to the discussion and work with the professionals who would be dealing with the issues they raised.

The event was successful in attracting residents who had not been to a CSG meeting before; the agenda was more interesting because it was focused on their particular concerns.

Simple changes to the organisation of the CSG were also tried by groups to boost attendance, such as changing the meeting time or venue. Some groups found that meeting during the day excluded those who worked and therefore changed meeting times to the early evening instead. The accessibility of the venue was also a key factor in whether residents attended.

Making CSGs more accessible

Area Shell covered two wards and the group decided that the location of the meetings should be central to the two areas, so that residents from both wards could come and not feel that one ward was being given preferential treatment over the other.

In Area Pebble, meetings were held at a venue at the top of a steep hill which elderly people found difficult to access; so this was changed to somewhere easier for them to get to.

The issues discussed in the CSGs could be sensitive and service providers had to be mindful of the information they could release in the public domain. A balance has to be struck between confidentiality and providing residents with satisfactory answers to their concerns. In one CSG, the consultant tried to tackle this issue using role-playing sessions.

Role-playing

The consultant worked with the CSG to identify the types of difficult questions that residents might ask in meetings and role-played how service providers could respond to ensure the resident was given a satisfactory answer.

Outward-facing methods

The outward-facing approach aimed to engage with local communities outside the formal CSG meetings. It did not require people to attend CSG meetings but still allowed community members to contribute to the agenda. This enabled the CSGs to reach a wider section of the community and to gather information from residents not likely to attend meetings. A variety of outward-facing methods are described below.

Visual audit

Area Pebble conducted a 'visual audit' of two neighbourhood estates that had been identified as problem areas in need of support. Local representatives of the key service providers, such as the Police, Fire Service, Housing and Neighbourhood Wardens, together with a few local residents who attended the CSG meetings, walked around the estate and the residents pointed out issues in need of attention in the local task group action plans. The visual audit brought the problems of the estate to life and into context for the service providers. The walk was also used as an opportunity to speak to residents who were unlikely to come to CSG meetings, by approaching them on the street and asking for their perceptions of the problems on the estate.

Church hall event

Area Pier held a community event at a local church hall on a Saturday morning. The event was advertised through letter drops and posters on community notice boards. Service providers, such as the Police, Trading Standards, Neighbourhood Watch, and the Drug and Alcohol Action Team, had stalls providing community safety information and advice. There were also presentations from the chair of the CSG to publicise the group and visitors were asked to fill in a form about the problems in the area. Approximately 100 people attended. The majority were over 50, though this was partly because the planned event had intentionally coincided with a church coffee morning.

Market stall

Area Sea set up a stall in a busy market in the area one Saturday morning. Service providers and residents involved in the CSG gave out community safety advice. People were also asked to use coloured markers to identify problem areas on a map of the local area. It was hoped that the stall could be used to publicise CSG meetings, but the group discovered that people were not interested in attending them.

In this project, outward-facing methods neither mobilised residents to participate actively in the CSG nor facilitated community ownership of their problems and the solutions to them. Instead, they served only a 'consultative' purpose, providing a one-way flow of information about community issues from the residents to the CSG. However, they were still useful in better informing the CSG's work.

Accountability and community engagement

Practice messages:

- Define clear accountability structures.
- Create capacity for communities to get involved so that they are able to hold service providers to account.

If community members understand how the local issues they raise fit into the wider agenda of community safety, those residents are more likely to share ownership of them (Khamis, 2000; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006). Shared ownership includes some level of responsibility for dealing with the issues alongside service providers, together with some degree of accountability.

A combination of inward and outward-facing methods can help achieve this form of shared and mutual accountability. Outward-facing methods help groups to obtain a broader picture of local issues that need to be addressed. Inward-facing methods then provide mechanisms through which residents attending meetings can hold the group to account for actions undertaken to deal with priority issues, and consider realistic contributions local people themselves might make to solving them.

The evaluation found that, for residents within the CSG to engage fully in this way, two conditions need to be satisfied:

- first, residents need the skills and knowledge to engage with service providers to be on an equal footing with them; and,
- second, the CSG needs to establish locally appropriate structures to take into account residents' views.

Develop structures

- Include adequate time on the agenda for residents to raise their concerns by holding pre-meetings so their issues are noted and the agenda is focused.
- Minute and appropriately action residents' issues.
- Develop protocols of conduct for meetings to clarify acceptable behaviour and how issues should be raised in the group.

The evaluation also found that it was important to develop accountability structures beyond the CSG itself, up to the wider CDRP. This would allow local communities to hold to account those delivering community safety initiatives both on the ground and more widely in the city.

Maximising community involvement

Practice messages:

- Be realistic about the time and resources required to achieve effective community engagement.
- Provide resources that will assist those attempting to engage members of the community.
- Be realistic about what can be achieved through community engagement and be prepared to deal with the unexpected.
- Effective organisation of community engagement processes is essential to its success.

Community engagement events take time and resources to organise, so it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved when planning an event. Key questions to ask are:

- Where should the event take place?
- Who should be invited?
- How will the event be publicised?
- What information does the group organising the event want to obtain and provide?
- How will the group use that information?
- How will the event be evaluated to improve future events?

The timely provision of resources to assist communities, and those working within them, can be invaluable. In this project, consultants helped CSGs in using problem-solving techniques and developed toolkits around specific crime themes to support this. Those wanting to engage communities should consider implementing suitable capacity-building activities to assist this process.

The processes of engaging communities can be many and complex; any engagement activity needs to be managed efficiently. The evaluation found that the organisation of the CSGs was critical to their success.

Use of manuals

One consultant formulated a CSG manual for her area. This provided an organised portfolio for the group to use and build upon to direct their business. The manual included:

- terms of reference;
- action plans;
- service provider phone numbers;
- event details.

The management of community expectations is also essential; in particular, it is important to be honest about the extent to which contributions might realistically influence practice on the ground. The evaluation found that failure to do so can result in frustration and risks creating disengagement.

At the end of the evaluation period, it was clear that the CSGs and the consultants found the process of achieving community engagement a challenging task. The lessons discussed in this report suggest that the more flexible, transparent and organised initiatives are in engaging communities, especially in being clear about why they are trying to engage with local people to begin with, the easier it will be for communities to make valuable contributions and make a real difference to their neighbourhoods.

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