

Tool one: Knowing the community - understanding how people are feeling

Experience indicates that the best solutions to tensions and conflicts can be found inside communities and by communities themselves.

Public agencies have recognised, increasingly, the need to work alongside individuals, groups and organisations to tackle inequalities and build networks across communities so that people have more influence over decisions that affect their lives and a greater capacity to resolve conflicts themselves.

This section describes some of the techniques practitioners use:

- To get to know communities
- To support communities
- To understand the priorities and solutions communities identify

The section includes:

- A brief introduction
- Some techniques
- Some 'in practice' examples

Introduction

Community engagement is a means of preventing tensions from escalating. A by-product of being in either contact or relationship with communities is the informal information that can be gathered. In relation to tensions, that information can assist in our understanding of and response to:

- The community's perception of an area as a place to live; and
- The tension issues as they are emerging
- The impact of an event or incident on a community

The purpose of the work is to build cohesion and to build either contact or relationships that can withstand possible build up of community tension. We can predict that there are likely to be tensions within that process, as well as unpredictable tension in communities more generally.

Communities may be:

- **A geographical** community – locality based, neighbourhoods, estates, villages
- A community of **interest** – as in 'business community' or characteristics as in 'traveller community'
- **A virtual** community – electronic interactions, often enabling people to seek out those who espouse similar beliefs – as in the National Front website, designed to build a community of support for the repatriation of 'non-whites'.

Understanding how people are feeling requires sustained effort and commitment on the part of agencies and a willingness to learn from the experience developed by community development practitioners over many decades. In some ways our organisations have signed up to community engagement being ‘everyone’s job.’ The Metropolitan Police, for example, have a strategy that says community engagement is designed to improve decision making and enhance citizenship. It is:

“The proactive harnessing of the energies, knowledge and skills of communities and partners not merely to identify problems but also to navigate priorities for action and shape and deliver outcomes.”

The outcomes may include influencing how policing is delivered or youth services, housing, schools or health services. Understanding how people are feeling and the potential for tension is at the heart of better public services, demanding a **mainstream approach** and not something to be relegated to the margins, funded solely by external regeneration funds and operated on a ‘project’ basis.

As important as the outcomes are the values and methods of community development. There is body and depth of knowledge, practice and research in organisations such as the Community Development Foundation, Commission for Racial Equality and Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

www.cdf.org.uk/default.asp

www.cre.gov.uk/

www.jrf.org.uk/

The core human rights values of dignity, respect, equality and fairness underpin the approach to engaging with communities. Each area will need to develop its own values and approaches to community engagement. Those leading the community engagement strategy for the council or local strategic partnership should share the principles, values and methods and the connections with the tensions monitoring group as a part of the annual plan. Clearly, a common and co-ordinated approach makes sense both to giving consistent messages to communities and to best use of resources.

A locally shared understanding will be an important aspect of the local neighbourhood policing strategy and neighbourhood management approaches. The Metropolitan Police have adopted the following seven stages towards Safer Neighbourhoods:

- Research the local neighbourhood
- Engage with the local community
- Identify public preferences for action
- Investigate and analyse public preferences
- Identify priorities for action
- Plan and act
- Review

The techniques in this section support and underpin the Safer Neighbourhoods approach as well as contributing to tension monitoring.

Some techniques

Basic contact - The benefits to contact with communities are that you can get a view of how they are feeling in a fairly objective way, without them particularly knowing your 'agenda' or telling you 'what you want to hear'. You may understand the community better by consulting:

- Residents' surveys – can include cohesion questions such as 'how well do people from different backgrounds tend to get on in this area?' They are useful for an overview of a borough and are also broken down by ward. The trend over the years – these tend to be annual surveys - can also be useful.
- Community panels– Safer Neighbourhood Panels including youth panels, Independent Advisory Groups, Police Community Consultative Groups,
- Forums – such as pensioners, disabled people, refugees, LGBT, residents' or neighbourhood forums
- Topic specific community groups or forums
- Consultation documents
- Crime/Fear of Crime Surveys
- Community councils
- Focus groups

The following documents suggest questions for surveys for community cohesion and race relations:

www.communities.gov.uk/pub/690/BuildingaPictureofCommunityCohesion_id1502690.pdf

www.communities.gov.uk/pub/33/2005CitizenshipSurveyCrosscuttingthemes_id1501033.pdf

Building relationships – longer term engagement, patiently building trust over time requires a greater investment of time and professional commitment. Building trust will include:

- Translating yourself – making sure people understand the way you work, what you need and what you offer
- Working alongside – letting people diagnose their own problems and find their own solutions
- Managing the tension between support and interference
- Taking time to build informal relationships without a set outcome – so that, in times of tension, you can co-operate formally and effectively. Safer Neighbourhoods teams build 'Key Individual Networks' for this purpose
- Letting the outcomes be set by the community. This will improve the co-operation when priorities get dictated by circumstances such as a criminal investigation
- Community meetings being led by the community, especially in times of tension
- Having two-way relationships – that there is both give and take
- Acknowledging tensions within communities - starting 'where people are really at'

Reaching 'wide and deep' – reaching those who are 'furthest away' from contact with public agencies and listening to those whose voices are least heard, perhaps least understood or are most disaffected is a key challenge, but crucial. Thoughtful and creative approaches could include:

- Peer outreach and engagement – train young people or members of particular communities to broker relationships, appoint permanent 'community brokers'
- Avoiding the 'gatekeepers' and finding the 'gateways' in community leaders
- Involve women and young people in ways that are acceptable to them – demonstrating genuine listening and avoiding tokenism
- Be available at times that suit the community, beyond 'office hours'
- Innovative approaches using the arts or social activities as a means of reaching people and facilitating communication
- Recruiting staff who reflect the community they serve
- Involving people in the wider agenda of the area – beyond their 'special interest' to encourage fuller integration

Action research - This technique is a way of building relationship with communities, building their capacity and co-operating to determine solutions to agreed problems. It is particularly effective with members of so called 'hard to reach' communities.

Building capacity - involves activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills, abilities and confidence of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities. This includes:

- Supporting the development of structures and support groups
- Small grants schemes – with cohesion criteria that encourage working across divides – work to ensure funding is not divisive
- Training and support – through Councils for Voluntary Service or similar

Acting together – bringing different sections of the community together and different agencies to work on projects or issues:

- Community events, festivals and celebrations
- Addressing specific problems and causes of tension
- Community campaigns, clean ups and environmental projects
- Local newsletters that different sections of the community can contribute to

Promoting belonging – supporting active citizenship through:

- Training for underrepresented groups to become school governors, magistrates
- Encouraging people to engage with the democratic process – as representatives or voters
- Developing and promoting a shared vision for the local area
- Involving all sections of the community in everyday processes, eg – through Planning for Real, engagement of local people in the (land use) planning process

In practice

In practice: Community brokers - acting together in Harrow

Concerned residents in Brooke Avenue, South Harrow contacted Harrow Council when groups of men began to gather at the end of the street for several hours a day. Some residents did not understand why the groups were constantly there, and found their presence threatening.

Local police started to monitor activity in the area, and soon established that men were gathering in numbers to visit a nearby shop to purchase and chew Khat, a legal substance that can produce a temporary 'high'. This is a social pastime in Somalia, akin to drinking alcohol in the UK.

At first owners of the building denied the activity was going on, and progress was only made when representatives from the local Harrow Association of Somali Volunteer Organisations (HASVO) got involved, offering to act as mediators.

Harrow Council and police set up a meeting for Brook Avenue residents, Somali community representatives and local traders. HASVO was able to reassure the owners of the building that the council and police were coming to talk to them, but were not looking to threaten or alienate anyone.

Feedback from the meeting was that matters had improved significantly and that a better understanding of each other is beginning to result in greater tolerance.

www.rota.org.uk/pages/publications/briefings.htm

In practice: Action research - the Building Bridges Project (BBP)

BBP is carried out by 16-25 year olds, and is hosted and managed by Race on the Agenda (ROTA) and two other Voluntary and Community Sector organisations. BBP mentors and trains a group of young BME and White British people (16-25 years old) to conduct fieldwork with young BME and White British Londoners who live in deprived London areas high in gun/knife crime. BBP aims to raise the group's awareness of ethics and human rights (i.e. respect, dignity, fairness, equality) and engage its members in research, diverting them from harmful activities. BBP also gives both of these two young groups a voice in the policymaking of an issue that involves them and their lives. While doing so, the young people involved: (a) conduct fieldwork with qualitative methodologies (b) receive human rights training (c) receive ethical fitness training (d) learn how to develop their thoughts in a written format (final report) (e) present their work to an audience and (f) produce a short film recording their findings. Ultimately, BBP helps all young participants to see things from a new perspective, promoting diversity, respect and community cohesion.

[www.rota.org.uk/downloads/ROTA%20-%20LVSC%20response%20to%20COIC%20\(final\).pdf](http://www.rota.org.uk/downloads/ROTA%20-%20LVSC%20response%20to%20COIC%20(final).pdf)

In practice: Building contact with young people in Waltham Forest - Defendin' Da Hood

Defendin' Da Hood was set up to help the Council and its partners to engage with disaffected young people in a way that meant genuine involvement for them. It also meant the Council had to show young people that they were really listening to them and that their views made a difference. Six events have been held so far, with young people enjoying entertainment and music, but always having to discuss a serious topic first - with the Council and its partners committed to listening to what they say.

Following the July 7 bombings in London, the Council was asked by community leaders to organise an event to enable young Asian people to build better communications links with their elders. Other topics have included teenage pregnancy, gun crime, a missing teenager appeal, Christmas celebrations and community tolerance. There is now a large database of young people who have signed up to a text service, where the Council sends information and alerts about events and other issues.

Defendin' Da Hood has also resulted in the development of a radio station, and a group of young people have been trained to become a young people's independent advisory group. The most dramatic outcome was a 40% reduction in violent crime around the time of the first event. We are supporting a group called Parents Against Violence and, perhaps most importantly, we have a database of 950 young people previously involved in or on the edge of gang culture who want to improve their life chances.

The programme is now a prominent mechanism for engaging in a two-way communication process with young people who would previously have been described as 'hard to reach'. Through the programme, young people have begun to experience having a positive impact upon issues of direct concern to them and are seen as our partners in seeking solutions to the issues that affect their lives.

Putting Respect Back Onto the Streets - A hard hitting play written and performed by young people highlighting examines gun crime and social exclusion. It follows the stories of a number of young people to give the audience a perspective on how a young person can become both a perpetrator and victim of crime. 14 young people wrote, directed and act in the play. It is the second play that the award winning Defending Da Hood project has produced. They first examined the issues surrounding teenage pregnancy as part of the joint Council and NHS "Let's Talk About Sex campaign.

Waltham Forest Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Cllr Afzal Akram, said: "This play is just one of the ways that we are helping young people to understand that there are serious consequences attached to breaking the law, both for themselves and their families. We will continue to look for new and innovative ways of communicating with our young people to ensure they have all the support and guidance they need to make informed life choices."

In practice: collaboration in Southwark – faith in the neighbourhood

The Southwark faith in the neighbourhood Co-ordinator says: “I realised that whilst Safer Neighbourhoods teams were making an effort to speak to particular organisations and groups within their ward, contact with religious groups was much less regular. I devised a scheme which promotes communication between all faith groups and their local police. The scheme includes:

1. Face-to-face communication between all local faith groups and Safer Neighbourhood Teams
2. Prayer points for Christian communities and other relevant means of engaging other faith traditions
3. Community events, a newsletter
4. Training for police officers
5. Information disseminated on general community and safety issues.

Participants say “Community members now enjoy a more relaxed feeling of confidence and a better understanding of how police work. The Community Police and Neighbourhood scheme is very much appreciated. It is now much easier to co-operate and participate.”

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