UrbanBuzz
Building sustainable communities

Project

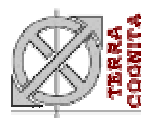# Socio-Environmental Disorder & Urban Configuration
(SEDUC)

Report

Case Study: London Borough of Tower Hamlets

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Background:

Since 2006, the community safety department within the London Borough of Tower Hamlets working in partnership with other agencies, notably the police had developed a working relationship based on the nationally recognised problem solving methodology. Problem solving is making use of data and other information to establish the existence and extent of a problem(s).

Problem solving has built on the routine activity theory[1] which identified that for every incident, there was a motivated offender, a presence of a suitable target and an absence of a capable guardian or similar to protect the victim and to inhibit the offender. This was then developed further into the problem analysis triangle which is seen as the national model for problem solving and is used extensively by crime and disorder partnerships.
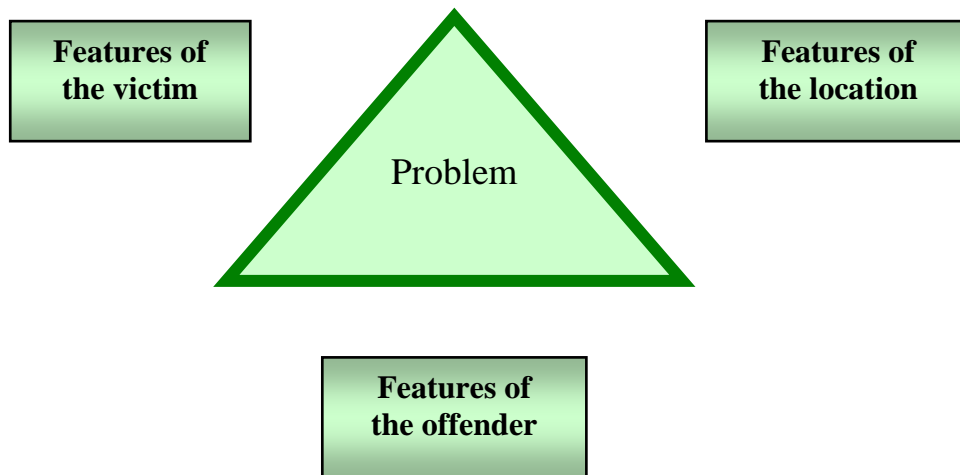
Should at least one element of the features be removed, the problem is less likely to be repeated. London Borough of Tower Hamlets found that they could influence the victims and offenders using existing resources, such as targeted policing and victim support and pro-active crime prevention advice, but it was difficult with existing resources to influence location features which might influence offending behaviour.

The partnership bid for £2m of neighbourhood renewal funding to deliver a project which would be evidence led and aimed at providing interventions which changed the environmental features which might be influencing repeat and continued crime and anti-social behaviour across areas of Tower Hamlets. The bid was successful and the project commenced in 2006.

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[1] Cohen & Felson 1979

The process:

The process that was followed for the project was as follows;

- Engagement with landlords
- Evidence – led, including GIS mapping
- Crime Prevention Surveys
- Consultation with residents
- Commissioning works
- Quality Assuring finished works
- Community Feedback
- Lessons learnt

Engagement with landlords:
As this project was not going to be centred on council owned properties, but across the Borough wherever it was identified there were repeat and ongoing problems, a crucial element of this project was to raise awareness with the variety of landlords, social and private which may be asked to assist with this project. To this end, private and public landlords were contacted using a variety of media, such as local papers and forums in order to promote the scheme. Part of this was to also engage with them as it was envisaged that landlords would contribute towards work in their area in order to maximise the amount of help that could be given.

During the length of the scheme, private, social and council landlords were active partners to the scheme.

Evidence-led:
As stated above, problem solving is making use of data and other information to establish the existence and extent of a problem(s). In order to establish where repeat and ongoing series of burglary and anti-social behaviour were happening and in order to baseline the incidents, the detailed analysis of crime and disorder statistics was required.

Crime and other police statistics were easily available for analysis, but more localised statistics relating to anti-social behaviour were harder to come by initially as there were very few centrally recorded. To this end, landlords were contacted in order to establish what localised statistics might be available, such as caretaker information regarding drug paraphernalia and graffiti.

Once all the information was received by the analysts, crime analyst reports were produced which indicated which areas suffered from the most repeated crime and anti-social behaviour. These were compared in order to see if there were any areas which appeared to be suffering from both. From this, we could establish which areas we believed would benefit from environmental improvements[2]. Once the areas were agreed, detailed hotspot maps were created for various crimes, including burglary and assaults and separate maps created for anti-social behaviour. This enabled a more detailed look at where in particular within the agreed area we needed to concentrate on.

It was agreed however, that this project would focus on areas and estates rather than just the properties or streets in which the offences were occurring as we wanted to reduce where possible the displacement effects.

Crime Prevention Surveys:
Following the agreement of the initial areas to focus on, site visits were made to each area and a crime prevention survey carried out in order to establish whether there were environmental issues

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[2] This was subject to further site visits and crime prevention surveys

which may have contributed to the problems. The site visits where possible were conducted with representatives of the landlords, such as local housing staff and caretakers, representatives of any tenant associations and local police.

What do we mean by environmental issues?
- Lack of natural surveillance
- Insecure stairwells
- Lack of defensible space
- Many footpaths which create 'rat runs'
- Poor lighting
- lack of capable guardian
- Undercrofts below blocks of flats

The above are some examples of things that were looked for. The crime prevention surveys identified both the issue and the potential solutions and this was then used as part of the resident consultation that took place.

Potential solutions to the above issues are:
- Opening up natural surveillance by removing barrier to line of sight if possible
- Securing stairwells by installing door entry systems
- Providing defensible space by railings or landscaping in front of building
- Reducing 'rat runs' by closing footpaths that were not used
- Improving lighting
- Installing CCTV (takes place of lack of capable guardian)
- Securing undercrofts usually by railing off, but it could be by infill building

Examples:

Above is an example of an undercroft which caused problems with youths congregating late at night and making loud noise and leaving rubbish. The agreed solution was to rail off the undercroft.
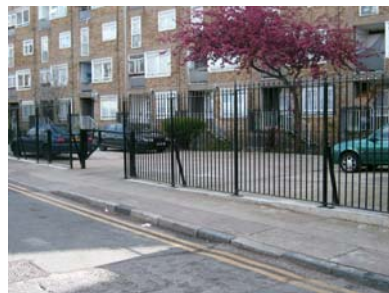
In this example, there was a lack of natural surveillance to the car paek and as a result there were many instances of thefts from cars. In order to make offenders feel more vulnerable, we remove the brick wall and replaced it with decorative railings so that the car park could be seen by passers by.

Above is an example of properties which have no defensible space in front of them The residents ere suffering from youths congregating close to the ground floor flats and knocking on doors and causing a real nuisance to residents. The answer was simple in providing them with railed off space which they could then use to put pot plants in. The same effect could have been achieved by using shrubs and bushes if the environment was right to create a 'green' barrier.

Above is an example of reducing areas which have no natural surveillance. On the left is the footpath with a hidden triangle which was used by 'muggers' to hid behind the walls and attack people that used the footpath which runs between two large housing estates. By railing it off the threat was removed.

Consultation with residents:
With any environmental improvement works, it is essential to gain the engagement of the residents as they are the people who will be living with the solutions. It is essential to conduct 'real' consultation and this was done in a number of ways. Public meetings were held to give residents and users of the areas a say in, firstly, confirming that the issues and locations we had identified were correct and secondly ensuring that they were happy with the proposed solutions. It is vital to try and reach all sections of the community, so attending elderly lunch clubs, youth clubs, religious gatherings and such like is a good idea as these groups may well have their own individual concerns. Indeed on a number of occasions, residents identified additional problems that affected them which we were able to include in the final package of measures.

Once we were happy that we had reached consensus, we proceeded to engage with contractors.

Commissioning works and quality assuring those works:
Once a contractor has been appointed, it is vital to build up a working relationship with them in order to achieve a positive end result. Whilst at this stage there is a clear plan of what we want to achieve, conducting further site visits with the contractors to ensure they know what is required can also produce additional 'professional' advice in terms of installation and quality. This can be down to the practicality of what we want to achieve v the practicality from a building point of view. Additionally it may be advice regarding the need for planning or building control consent. Should either of these be required then the project can be delayed by a minimum of 6 weeks.

We decided that as part of the project, we wanted to enhance the feel of the environment as well and to that end worked with the contractors to use good quality railings and a variety of railings and brickwork. This was important to ensure that residents felt the quality of life had also improved as a result of the works.

Fortnightly visits were made with the contractors around the various sites to ensure that the work was being carried out to the agreed specification and quality, but also to obtain instant feedback from local residents as well.

Monitoring of results and community feedback:
In order to measure the impact the work has had, it is vitally important to conduct further analysis of the information and statistics after say 6 months and then a year to compare the new found figures with those collected at the benchmarking stage at the beginning.,

It is also vital to go back to the community and ask for feedback and comment as this provides valuable information, not only on whether they like the work, but also to pick up any concerns the residents may have as well. It is also possible to benchmark residents views if you have conducted a residents survey before hand and then conduct a similar survey after the work has been completed.

It is however, also important to return to the residents after a period of time, such as 6 months or a year to see if the works have had the same impact.

Lessons Learnt:
There were a number of lessons that were learnt throughout this project.

One of the biggest lessons was the need for planning and building consent for various works we wished to carryout. This can be a time consuming process as well as costing money to apply. The minimum timescale is likely to be 6 weeks from the point the application is received by the planners. It is essential that the application is clear about the extent of the problem and why the proposed change is essential in tackling the problem. Maintaining a good and clear dialogue with the planning department is also good.

Another lesson that was learnt early on was that of the need to be very clear and concise with the contractors to ensure that the work done was that which was expected. Always be clear on which type of lock and how many keys were required, does it have to be a key such as an FB lock which all emergency services hold or can it be an off the shelf mortice lock. The clearer the instruction, the less confusion there will be.

Timescales and slippage can also be a problem. Especially if the contractors provide unrealistic initial timescales or have too much work on to cope. Be realistic with timescales as most things that will need to be done will have lead in times. If you are not realistic, the information you feedback to residents on the schemes will be inaccurate and lead to frustration as well as creating more work for yourselves when dealing with residents wanting to know why the work hasn't been completed on time. It is also important that the contractor feeds back to you if there is going to be any slippage due to for example 'bad weather'. This part will be a lot easier if you have built a relationship up with the contractor and they feel able to discuss these things.

The last point worth making is that of effective partnership working, whether it is with the landlords, planners or residents, if everyone are working together for a common purpose then the process will run smoothly.

Mark Deane, Phaeton Consulting, January 2009