NEIGHBOURHOOD TASKFORCES

A TOOL FOR DEALING WITH CONFLICT IN COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION: RESOLVING CONFLICT IN NEIGHBOURHOODS

Conflict exists at all levels of society, from the most localised of settings where neighbours bicker over the height of hedges to its most extreme form, violence between nations. Tensions also exist under the surface of most communities. The root cause may be lingering feelings of bitterness over past events, stereotypes of other communities' cultures or different aspirations for the future development of the area.

Left unchallenged, tensions can develop into animosities between different community groups, younger and older residents, service providers and residents, or people from different socio-economic backgrounds. For a minority of neighbourhoods these conflicts can become solidly entrenched and lead to situations where they affect the daily lives of people living in the area. Thankfully they rarely lead to violence. Instead communities often seem caught in endless debate and argument over the same issues whenever someone steps forward to make a change.

Of course, dealing with conflict is nothing new. Indeed much of the focus of recent regeneration and neighbourhood working agendas has been building community capacity and supporting agencies to work more closely with each other and residents. Techniques to help

resolve conflict, particularly between warring individuals, have been developed in the UK, drawing on some of the lessons learnt from conflict resolution in the developing world. However, in our experience, because conflict at the neighbourhood level tends to be much more subtle it is rarely tackled and instead is frequently swept under the carpet. Acknowledging these tensions and helping to alleviate them will help to develop stronger social networks, crucial to residents' sense of belonging to their local area.

Over the past three years, as part of our practical work with neighbourhoods[1] across the UK, we have come across many communities where the hard work and commitment of local agencies, service providers, councillors and voluntary and community sector groups were not as effective as they might have been as a result of these underlying tensions and misunderstandings. In response we have worked in partnership with two local authorities, the **London Borough of Haringey** and the **London Borough of Tower Hamlets** (through the **Tower Hamlets Partnership**) to pilot a simple model of community development and conflict resolution called Neighbourhood Taskforces. Both Limehouse in Tower Hamlets and the Chesnut Estate in Haringey are multi-faceted and vibrant communities, but they also both suffer from the challenge of different populations and community groups in disagreement with one another. Our experience of working in these two communities is captured in this toolkit.

The Neighbourhood Taskforce model draws on a combination of familiar approaches: research into local people's views, fast-paced meetings, mediation techniques and action planning, which when used together can help build the capacity of the community to work with each other and local agencies to create their own solutions to the problems in their communities.

This guide explains the Neighbourhood Taskforce model, and describes how it worked in practice in our two pilot projects to assist in developing new relationships and working practices locally. Whether you are a Neighbourhood Manager, a service provider or a committed resident we hope it will inspire and assist you to tackle an issue of concern in your local area, and help build stronger relationships between the people and groups working in your neighbourhood.

[1] To read more about the Young Foundation's work in neighbourhoods see www.youngfoundation.org

Apartments on the Chesnut Estate, Haringey

WHAT IS A NEIGHBOURHOOD TASKFORCE?

WHAT IS A NEIGHBOURHOOD TASKFORCE?

A Neighbourhood Taskforce brings together a group of residents and service providers from a specific local area to work on a single issue for a limited period of time in order to:

- tackle an identified problem that is causing significant problems for residents and where agencies have been unable to assist to date
- Increase community engagement with public agencies, and the level of partnership working between agencies, service providers and residents.

STEP BY STEP: THE NEIGHBOURHOOD TASKFORCE MODEL

A Neighbourhood Taskforce project involves three phases:

1. **Identifying the issues** – an essential first step is to explore what the community's most pressing problems are and how different people perceive their causes and effects. By talking to residents and agencies' staff you will be able to identify informally a range of active local people who will be interested in taking part in a series of Taskforce meetings.

   In order to gain a good understanding of the neighbourhood, you will need to conduct research into local views and opinions. The internet can provide some background information into local demographics and organisations, but in-depth understanding of the community is best gained through talking to local people face to face, either through surveys or research interviews.

2. **The Taskforce meetings** – The Taskforce meetings provide an opportunity to actively try to solve an issue that the Taskforce members prioritise. The process of working together and talking candidly about their views will help improve relationships between the people and organisations involved.

   You will need to bring together a group of residents, members of community groups and representatives of public agencies to take part in a series of meetings (we held three over three months in our pilots). A facilitator (someone taking on the role of a neutral chair) will help the group talk constructively about the problems their community face and the ways in which they could work together to alleviate one of these.

3. **The action plan and initiative** – the immediate purpose of the Neighbourhood Taskforce is to design a practical initiative that the members of the group can carry out after the final Taskforce meeting.

   The final meeting will need sensitive facilitation to help the group develop an action plan dividing practical tasks and responsibilities evenly between those taking part. Behind-the-scenes mediation with agencies and individuals may be needed to ensure that every one is supportive of the plan.

Section four contains key questions to help you get started on your own Neighbourhood Taskforce.

WHY IS THE NEIGHBOURHOOD TASKFORCES MODEL DIFFERENT?

Intensive community development is not new, and many of the techniques the Neighbourhood Taskforce draws on will be familiar to those who have worked directly with communities in the past. However the Neighbourhood Taskforce model combines these techniques with a specific time-limited approach and a focus on practical action.

A Taskforce will:

- **Acknowledge tension** – accepting conflict and giving local people a chance to talk openly about its roots publicly with simple mediation techniques

- **Use different research methods and the knowledge of local stakeholders to identify a few issues that everyone cares passionately about** – even if people think the solutions are very different, or don't know what the best approach might be
- **Involve different stakeholders at different times** – offering the chance for residents, councillors, service providers and other interested parties to share their views and/or be involved in the process
- **Minimise meetings, and keep the ones that do happen short and sweet** – having a limited number of facilitated meetings that use activities and visual props to help ensure that the Taskforce members are able to focus on practical outcomes
- **Focus on producing a practical plan of action** – helping to alleviate a particular priority issue that the Taskforce members have themselves identified.

The Neighbourhood Taskforce Model

Houses on the Chesnut Estate, Haringey

WHY WOULD YOU NEED A NEIGHBOURHOOD TASKFORCE?

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Why would your community benefit from a Neighbourhood Taskforce project?

...because neighbourhoods are complicated places

The British population is changing at a rapid pace. Part of this shift is fuelled by migration into the UK from other countries and now even those parts of Britain that were traditionally homogenous are becoming increasingly diverse; more than 138 languages are spoken in Scottish schools for example. However, this is only one facet of the changes taking place. Our population is also ageing, and last year, for the first time in our history, people over the age of 60 outnumbered children.

Complicating this situation even further is the movement of people around the country, from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Where once residents were likely to live in the area where they were born, now increased mobility and competition for jobs has lead to many moving home more often. The challenges for building cohesive communities in these circumstances are well documented, and though many have been successful, there are still communities where stereotypes, misconceptions and bitterness have caused tensions.

In recent times more subtle lines of conflict have appeared in many communities. The redevelopment of brownfield land, often in ex-industrial areas, has seen 'lifestyle homes' popping up in centres of densely populated and sometimes extremely deprived areas. These can provide a boost to the regeneration of the local community but without opportunities for both the new and existing residents to interact, there's a danger that the new developments become islands of affluence cut off from the people around them. Building cohesive communities across socio-economic divides is particularly challenging, as residents may have different expectations, for example as to how public space is used.

"Sometimes problems have raised their ugly head on the estate. We need to deal with them."

Local Resident

Our communities, already complex, are likely to continue changing in the future. Acknowledging that different attitudes and perspectives exist within a neighbourhood can be a helpful first step in overcoming conflict and disagreement.

Tower Hamlets has the highest proportion of young people under the age of 25 in the country. It is also an extremely ethnically diverse borough with large groups of white British, Irish, Chinese, African and Bengali residents.

...because resident and agency relationships aren't simple either

Tensions may exist not just between different groups of residents, but also among local service providers and community organisations. Some areas boast engaged and supportive relationships between residents and the local authority, largely a result of years of outreach work and hard effort from both sides. Unfortunately the same is not true of all neighbourhoods. Previous failures on the part of well-meaning service providers or elected councillors have in some cases lead to bitter resentments in the local community. Similarly, in some areas community groups are able to work together towards a shared goal and vision, in others, groups can be in fierce competition with each other.

In areas of low community capacity, partnership working between service providers and residents is more difficult. A culture of dependency on agencies to address every local issue, without residents also contributing time and resources as individuals, can make finding local solutions laborious.

The result of this complexity is that some communities are caught in a trap, unable to improve their own relationships with agencies and with each other. During our own work with over 25 local authorities in the past three years we have worked in numerous communities that would have benefited from an upfront acknowledgment of past mistakes so that more productive relationships could have been formed.[2]

...because if you don't tackle low-level tensions they may escalate

Tensions within communities can often be triggered by misunderstandings or by poor communication. If these misunderstandings are not tackled they can reinforce unhelpful stereotypes or prejudices and undermine community confidence, building unnecessary tension.

During one of the Taskforce pilots, residents frequently referred to the actions of local service providers over 10 years ago, despite the significant change in the community since that point. Resentment needs to be tackled as quickly as possible.

...because focusing on common ground is a good first step in conflict resolution

Much of the existing theory around conflict resolution and mediation has been developed in more extreme situations than we are likely to encounter in our local neighbourhoods.[3] However, many of the principles can be helpfully applied in this setting. Simple steps like choosing an easily solved issue to tackle first can build confidence. Tackling one issue at a time to build consensus within a group can work well in areas of low capacity. Section four outlines some of these techniques in more detail.

[2] 'The power of an apology', Vicki Savage, in *Transforming Neighbourhoods – a collection of stories about community empowerment*, The Young Foundation (2007)

[3] To read more about community mediation in the UK see Neighbourhood Taskforces page on www.youngfoundation.org

...because the process can support participants to work in new ways

Neighbourhood Taskforces provide an opportunity to do things differently. Many of the participants in the two pilot programmes appreciated the opportunity to:

- have their say before the Taskforce meetings began, so that the first meeting wasn't sidetracked by rehashing old arguments
- limit the number of meetings held and avoid 'meeting overload'
- interact in an informal environment
- absorb information from a number of sources, not just typed notes
- draw, vote and use other forms of non-verbal communication
- work in small groups on particular issues, rather than listening to other agenda items.

These tools and techniques can help to build the capacity of participants to interact with each other, negotiate solutions in a shorter period of time.

"It's been so good to approach things from a different angle, not just the same old issues."

Service provider and Taskforce group participant

"The meetings were extremely well managed… the overall aims were always made clear and, as a result, always achieved – and with clarity."

Local resident and Taskforce participant

Riverside apartments in Limehouse

GETTING STARTED: FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

GETTING STARTED: FIVE KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Before you begin a Neighbourhood Taskforce project you may wish to consider the following questions:

QUESTION ONE: WHO WILL BE INVOLVED?

Agreeing a project sponsor or lead:

A Neighbourhood Taskforce project could be set up by any agency or concerned individual, but is most likely to originate with the local authority, community groups or another service provider. Having a locality or neighbourhood worker from the council involved will help to draw in other partners.

Our experience in Haringey and Tower Hamlets has also shown that a project sponsor, perhaps a senior officer or executive councillor, can help build the profile of the Taskforce and ensure support for it from senior members of staff at the council and other agencies.

Defining the neighbourhood:

The word 'community' is a flexible term and can refer to people living in very different sized geographical areas. A Neighbourhood Taskforce could work well in many situations, provided that the residents taking part have a sense of affinity with the area. Such neighbourhoods, whatever their size, are those naturally identified by the people living there rather than from lines arbitrarily drawn on a map.

We piloted Neighbourhood Taskforces in two areas – one a small housing estate of approximately 400 homes, the other a larger neighbourhood with approximately 10,000 residents.

The key stakeholders:

- **Residents** – the most crucial element of any Taskforce project. The initial 'identifying the issues' phase of the Taskforce will provide a good opportunity to speak to a range of residents and residents' groups. It will help you to identify individuals who may be interested in taking part in Taskforce meetings. Some might be experienced at representing the community's views and others may be new to a community development activity.

To ensure that all residents were able to voice their opinions on the key issues affecting the Chesnut Estate in Haringey we used a number of research techniques to engage local people including door-to-door survey, focus groups and interviews.

Having a fixed start and end date for the project can encourage residents to get involved. In Tower Hamlets we used the offer of 'three meetings in three months' to attract a number of residents.

- **Local community and voluntary sector groups** often have a wealth of skills and experience from working with local residents. Be honest and upfront about any past tensions in the area when asking for volunteers – a Taskforce is an opportunity to move beyond those.

  You may decide to hold a Taskforce project in an area of limited existing community activity, in which case think carefully about which groups may exist under the radar, for example groups attached to local religious buildings, parent support groups at local schools, keep fit classes attached to the local health surgery.

Don't write off residents who are sometimes branded as 'the usual suspects' as their experience and commitment can be extremely important.

- **Elected councillors** – it is important to engage elected members in the Taskforce process. Many have lived and worked in the local area for several years and will have unique insights. Politics can never be removed from the role of an elected councillor, but it is important to stress again that a Taskforce project will focus on a particular community issue and will offer an opportunity to build community capacity and cohesion.
- **Local authority officers** – involve officers who work in the local area from the start. This might include dedicated neighbourhood

management teams as well as frontline staff from housing, regeneration, environmental services, youth teams, etc.

- **Representatives of other service providers** – for example the police, Primary Care Trust (PCT), youth workers, school head teachers, etc. Not all these representatives will need to be involved in the Taskforce meetings but it will certainly be helpful to gauge their opinions during the 'identifying the issues' phase of the project. Where community tensions exist over a particular service issue, for example policing, it will be crucial to have the appropriate representative at meetings, and for service providers and residents to work on solutions together with a sense of shared responsibility.

  Some service providers suffering from 'meeting overload' may not be keen to take part in a project. Explaining the new angle the Taskforce is taking and its time-limited approach may help.

In Haringey we found particular enthusiasm amongst service providers for the new type of meeting style that the Taskforce model offered. Service providers were willing to acknowledge previous tensions, but keen to work together with residents to focus on future actions.

Taskforce meetings should be facilitated by a neutral party who can remain objective throughout and help steer the conversation.

QUESTION TWO: WHICH ISSUES WILL THE TASKFORCE FOCUS ON?

Before engaging local stakeholders in a Taskforce project it is worth spending a little time digging below the surface of a community to discover what local people consider to be the most pressing issues in their area. Establishing the community's existing assets and strengths at the outset can also be useful during later discussions exploring potential solutions to those problems.

The importance of taking time to speak to the community:

- Speaking to the people who live and work in a neighbourhood will help you prepare for, and make the most of, your Taskforce meetings. Even if you know the area relatively well, other people may have opinions or perceptions that you may not be familiar with
- Undertaking this research might help you to identify connections between the various issues people discuss with you, which could

help guide the direction of your Taskforce meetings

- Giving people a chance to express their views and to be listened to helps engage them in the process and can increase their sense that their involvement is valuable to the whole project
- Appreciating the different use of language that various groups use, such as young and older people, or between service providers and residents will be useful throughout the project
- Some smaller issues might arise which can be easily resolved, and which do not need to take up time during the Taskforce meetings.

Community research could include:

- using the internet to find local community groups or to explore local demographics[4]
- surveys of local residents carried out either door-to-door, at popular places in the community such as the school gates, or set up on-line and advertised in the community[5]
- conversations or interviews with individuals to capture their perspectives and those of any organisations they represent
- group conversations or informal focus groups.

"I love this estate. Absolutely love it!"

Local resident

The type of issues that might arise during this initial research phase:

We found thatmany of the problems people wanted to tackle focused on issues around environmental dereliction; community safety and anti-social behaviour; young people's behaviour; youth service provision; or getting to know neighbours from different backgrounds.

In Tower Hamlets and Haringey the Taskforce groups chose to focus on young people. In both cases concern over young people's anti-social behaviour (perceived and actual) was matched with a desire to see more facilities for young people and more opportunities for young people to achieve their potential.

[4] The UK National Statistics Authority's website has census data for every neighbourhood in the country, see: www.statistics.gov.uk

[5] There are various websites that allow you to set up surveys on-line at no cost to yourself. A good place to start is www.surveymonkey.com

QUESTION THREE: HOW DO WE SET UP THE TASKFORCE GROUP?

It is worth considering some practical issues when drawing together your Taskforce group.

Who to include:

- The group needs to include enough people for diverse opinions to be represented but be small enough for the facilitator to be able to guide their discussions confidently
- Not everyone will be able to attend each meeting. This is not necessarily a problem but you do need to ensure some degree of continuity from one meeting to the next to avoid repeating previous discussions
- Some young people will feel uncomfortable attending and speaking at a community meeting and it is unlikely that many will be willing to be individual members of a Taskforce group. However, their involvement can be crucial, especially if youth issues are discussed. It might be more appropriate to involve them in the process in other ways, for example, a few members of the Taskforce group can attend a local youth club or school between Taskforce meetings to ask them their opinions on particular issues the Taskforce group is working on
- Some people might not have experience of expressing their views in public or perhaps they might not be fluent English speakers. If such a situation arises it is important to consider how best to support their involvement by providing them with more information, encouragement or mentoring.

Where to host your meetings:

The ideal location to hold meetings is somewhere neutral and comfortable for all members of the group. Ideally there would be enough space for the group to sit on comfortable chairs in a circle, facing each other, without a table in the middle. This will help to reduce any sense of confrontation.

Be clear on the offer:

When recruiting members of the Taskforce group it is important to clearly outline what the project hopes to achieve and what is expected of those taking part, in particular the fact that residents and service providers will work together in partnership.

QUESTION FOUR: HOW WILL WE RUN CONSTRUCTIVE MEETINGS?

The primary aim of the Taskforce meetings is to produce an action plan for a viable initiative that the Taskforce group's members can carry out. Meetings therefore have to be as effective as possible:

- **Establish the 'rules of the game' at the start of the meetings** – it is crucial to make clear that though there may be disagreements, everyone taking part has the right to be heard and to be respected by the other group members

[Of existing formal meetings in the community] "People get to rant at the council, but it's hard to see anything changing."

Local resident and taskforce group member

- **Don't avoid areas of conflict** – especially in the first meeting. It can be useful for people to have the opportunity to make their feelings clear, especially on highly emotive issues. However, try to ensure that this is done sensitively so that the group can develop a deeper understanding of each other's perceptions and where common ground might be found
- **Make the most of resources** – during individual meetings allow the group to suggest what information they would like to find out for the next meeting. Either the facilitator or another participant can volunteer to find this information on behalf of the group
- **Think about the positive** – discuss what strengths the community already has, not just its problems
- **Focus on action** – give people space to air their grievances but focus on action and how to bring about positive change.

In Limehouse, Tower Hamlets, the Taskforce group requested more information on what was being done in other UK towns and cities to engage young people and improve their employment opportunities. What emerged was that many of the service-led initiatives running in other places also existed in Tower Hamlets. Less prevalent were community-focused initiatives run by local people. The members of the Taskforce went on to propose a number of ideas for projects that they themselves could coordinate, which would help alleviate the problems they had identified in their first meeting.

[6] Involving people: INVOLVE www.involve.org.uk and www.peopleandparticipation.net; IDeA www.idea.gov.uk Facilitation Techniques: Idealist http://www.idealist.org/ioc/learn/curriculum/pdf/Facilitation-201.pdf ; Info design www.infodesign.com.au/usabilityresources/general/facilitationtechniques.asp ; Impact Alliance http://www.impactalliance.org/ev_n.php?ID=3782_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC

Some ideas for facilitating meetings[6]

Breaking the ice – instead of asking everyone in the group to introduce themselves, ask them to introduce the person sitting next to them. Give them a few minutes to talk to their partner and find some specific information, for example, their name and what they like most about the neighbourhood.

Start with the positives – ask your group members to create an inventory of all the assets in the community; this might include community buildings, a strong charitable sector or a popular annual festival. This information may prove useful later in the process if the group decides to link their initiative to something or somewhere that is already popular with the community.

Think about how information is presented – creating wall displays of information and inviting people to walk around the room reading it before discussions begin can be more engaging than handing out printed minutes for people to read silently. Using maps, DVDs and photographs can be useful in sparking discussions. It can also be helpful to give people small stickers to fix to the information they think is most relevant. This enables the facilitator to identify key issues when initiating a whole group discussion.

Let the group set some of the agenda – avoid being too prescriptive with meeting agendas. Allow people space to suggest ideas or change tack. Don't have minutes from the last meeting, just a list of action points and allow some time to let people know what progress was made between meetings.

Stop individuals dominating the process – plan your time so that activities have a specific purpose and time limit. Working in small groups can be helpful or using group decision-making tools such as the hand signals used in Collective Decision Making (CDM)[7] to give non-verbal feedback on discussions. Ask people specific 'closed' questions rather than open-ended ones, for example, 'why did you highlight that point on the wall as the most important one?' rather than 'what issues are important for you?'. To combat extremely talkative people it can be useful for the facilitator to sit directly next to them rather than opposite, and to limit eye-contact between them both.

[7] Conflict and consensus http://www.ic.org/pnp/ocac/; Seeds for change www.seedsforchange.org.uk/free/resources

Quotes, statistical data and impressions that had emerged from the initial research into community life in Limehouse were used to catalyse the discussions of the Limehouse Taskforce group. These gave participants the chance to see that their views had been heard and to reflect on others' points of view. At the end of the first meeting a degree of consensus had been reached, that Limehouse's varied problems mainly stemmed from a lack of connectivity and understanding among the different sections of the local community.

QUESTION FIVE: HOW WILL WE DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN?

As you and your Taskforce group make progress through your meetings, you be able to work together to discuss the issues affecting the neighbourhood and identify those that are a priority. You should then begin to consider what potential solutions could help alleviate them. In the final meeting the group will need to select the solution or initiative they are most keen to pursue and draw up a plan to put it into action.

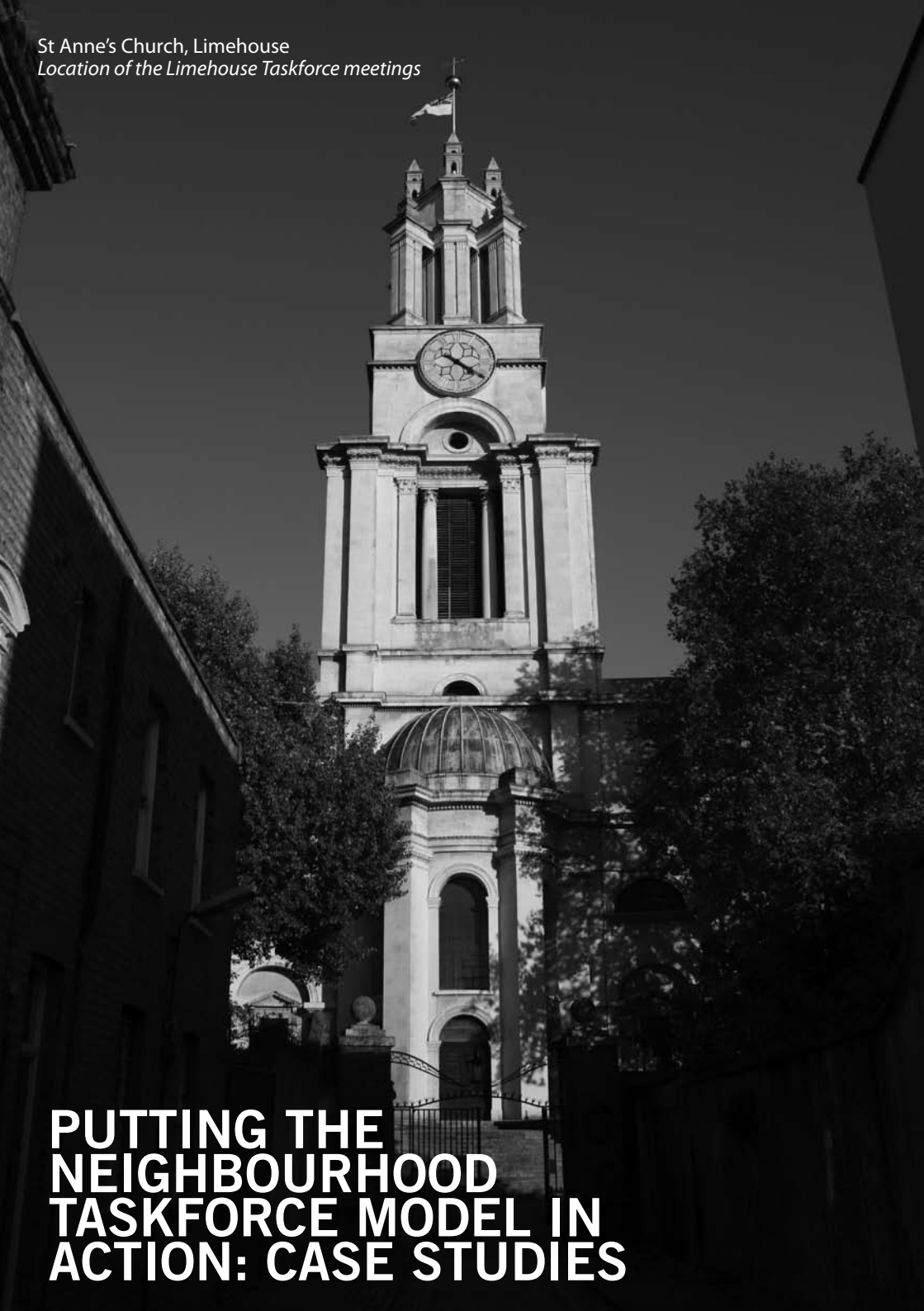
Finding a workable solution is a potentially divisive point in the project's process. However there are a number of different ways the facilitator can help the group to make a decision. Once a solution or initiative has been selected the group as a whole will need to list all the activities that will need to take place in order for the solution to become a reality. Finally members of the group will need to volunteer and commit to undertake those tasks.

Some points to consider:

- It might be helpful for one person to volunteer to be a coordinator for the initiative, but tasks need to be fairly distributed across the team. It is important that no one individual, especially the coordinator, is overburdened with responsibility for the project
- It is important to remain realistic about the scope of any potential initiative. Becoming too ambitious and not being able to deliver the initiative could potentially leave the group feeling disheartened and unwilling to try again in the future. Aim for some 'quick wins' that will motivate the group
- Be clear what resources may be available from the council or other local bodies, especially if there are no grants available. Cash isn't essential – practical work based upon volunteering and partnership work can go a long way

- Be clear from the outset that there are a finite number of meetings and that the end goal is an action plan not more meetings
- The facilitator's role does not have to be dormant between meetings. They can helpfully use this time to talk to members of the group and others to build stronger relationships and commitment from them. This might involve drawing in new and appropriate group members, allaying fears of existing members over particular issues and linking into opportunities that may arise from public service agendas especially if potential funding is involved.

On the Chesnut estate in Haringey service providers led the discussion on developing an action plan, volunteering information about local funding streams to help implement the group's plans. This was complemented by local residents volunteering some of their free time to have conversations with others who weren't yet involved and to take a lead in organising a small community festival to build community confidence and encourage others to get to know their neighbours.



St Anne's Church, Limehouse
Location of the Limehouse Taskforce meetings

PUTTING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD TASKFORCE MODEL IN ACTION: CASE STUDIES

PUTTING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD TASKFORCE MODEL INTO ACTION: CASE STUDIES

During late 2007 and early 2008 the Young Foundation worked with local people in two communities in inner London, piloting the Taskforce model, and helping residents address and resolve local conflict. Both areas are vibrant communities, with active community organisations and elected members, yet both also struggled with the challenge of managing and working with the varied expectations of different groups in the area – whether old and young people, new and more established residents, people from different socio-economic backgrounds or people from different cultures. Many of the areas of disagreement were subtle, but working together to develop unifying actions has been positive. We hope their experience will be useful to you.

CASE STUDY ONE: LIMEHOUSE, TOWER HAMLETS

Changing times for Limehouse

Looking up at the forest of gleaming towers in Canary Wharf, it is hard to picture what the Thames riverbank would have once looked like. Some clues are visible as you walk around the adjacent area of Limehouse, packed as it is with visual reminders of the changing times and fortunes of the area. Limehouse, and the wider borough of Tower Hamlets, has been the first point of settlement for many immigrant groups coming to London, among them Huguenots, Irish, Chinese and more recently Bengalis. These arrivals have settled alongside a well-established indigenous population who, until its closure in the later decades of the 20th century, were largely employed in the once-thriving docklands.

The expansion of Canary Wharf 15 years ago also attracted new residents, mainly young professional people living in modern apartments with convenient transport links, charming river views and a village-like ambience (conspicuous in such a densely populated urban area). Whilst their arrival has undoubtedly brought benefits, the fast pace of development and their occasionally differing perceptions of how public space should be used has caused tension with more established residents.

What research revealed

Interviews and surveys in the initial phase of the Taskforce highlighted some issues of pressing concern to many local people. For some there was a genuine fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, much of which was attributed to local young people. Stories of violent attacks in local parks did not tally however with the experience of the neighbourhood's police officers, who conceded that local young people were at times extremely inconsiderate and noisy but rarely committed serious crimes.

Many of the people interviewed also discussed how difficult young people in the area found making their first steps in the world of work. Though many local students did well academically at school and university, this did not always lead them into successful careers. Not all young people had a good appreciation of the social conventions of working life, sometimes arriving late, talking in an informal manner or being inappropriately dressed. The interviewees explained that for various reasons local young people had not been able to learn these skills in the home and lacked a network of older friends and acquaintances who could help them to develop them.

The research also revealed that Limehouse has many enthusiastic and committed residents with an appetite to help improve the local area. People spoke warmly of the neighbourhood and mentioned, in particular, the various summer fetes that had taken place over the previous few years.

Focus of the Taskforce

At the end of the first Taskforce meeting its members agreed that the issue they wanted to prioritise was a lack of connection between the different groups living in the area, with a particular focus on local young people. This would help tackle various issues by giving people an opportunity to get to know each other, or at least to recognise each other. They hoped that the knock-on effects would be a reduction in the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, and the chance for young people to meet others who could offer them practical advice about work and careers.

The Taskforce group meetings

The three Taskforce meetings involved residents, service providers, locality staff, a ward councillor and voluntary and community groups.

- Meeting one: the findings of the research were used to discuss what was happening in the area, to challenge misconceptions and agree on the focus of the Taskforce. The members of the group requested more information about what types of projects existed in other British cities
- Meeting two: the information about activities in other cities was compared to what already existed in the local area. The discussions lead to various suggestions for initiatives that could fill the gaps
- Meeting three: the discussions in the final meeting allowed the group to select the initiative they wanted to pursue and draw up a practical plan to put it into action.

Taskforce action plan

The Limehouse Taskforce group decided to develop a community art project based on local people's experiences of Limehouse, which would take place in the run up to the popular local summer fete. They also planned inter-generational skills-sharing sessions with local residents at the local youth centre.

Lessons from the Limehouse Taskforce pilot

Challenges:

- Encouraging young people to attend meetings is extremely difficult. In this case we decided to test the ideas generated in the meetings with young people by going to the local youth centre and discussing ideas with young people in a comfortable setting
- It was difficult to keep the same group of people together for each meeting. Speaking to people on the phone between meetings meant their views could be heard, even if they couldn't make it to the next meeting.

Positives:

- There was a palpable change in the atmosphere between the first and final meetings, as people had a chance to talk and to hear other people's interpretation of the issues being discussed
- Members of the group commented that their relationships with others outside the Taskforce meetings, in other contexts, had improved.

CASE STUDY TWO: CHESNUT ESTATE, HARINGEY

Background

Nestled between a busy high street and Tottenham Hale, the Chesnut Estate feels relatively isolated from its surroundings. Despite this a whole range of amenities, a thriving high street, major transport facilities, various churches and schools are just a short walk away. The estate has around 350 homes, an attractive mixture of low-rise apartment blocks and terraced houses. Most of these homes are managed by 'Homes for Haringey', the local authority's Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO).

Haringey is the most diverse borough in London, with 49 per cent of the population coming from black and minority ethnic communities and over 190 languages being spoken. This diversity is only likely to increase in the coming years. The Chesnut Estate falls within the recently identified Tottenham Hale Growth Area, where significant development is planned. The Master Plan outlines proposals for around 2,500 new homes and new transport facilities close to the Chesnut estate.

What research revealed

Research showed that the estate is well served by a variety of active community organisations, including a residents' association, a friends of the local park group, a community association for elderly Caribbean residents and an active local Councillor. Despite its relatively small size the estate is also home to two community centres, both of which had been leased to community groups in the 1990s. One has many regular activities and classes taking place, the other is much less used particularly by residents from the estate itself.

Though some people were very conscious of the area's future development plans, others had not heard about the proposals. The local friends of the park were concerned that the plans would not include any proposals to upgrade the condition and facilities in the park.

Interestingly a door-to-door survey delivered very mixed results. Half the residents we spoke to said they felt safe in the area and felt a sense of connection to the estate. The other half reported quite different feelings, claiming the area was very dangerous, and blighted by anti-social behaviour. Some residents knew their neighbours, whereas others had few relationships with others living nearby.

Focus of the Taskforce

The Haringey Taskforce group very quickly came to the conclusion that their priority was to improve the area for local families, in particular by improving facilities for local young people. Suggestions included a community festival for the estate to encourage residents to get to know their neighbours and diversionary youth work in the park and local community centres, to reduce the number of young people 'hanging around'.

The Taskforce group meetings

The Taskforce group involved residents, local police officers, voluntary and community groups, a housing manager, youth workers, service providers and neighbourhood management team.

- Meeting one: the findings of the door-to-door survey and other research were used to discuss the focus of the Taskforce project. The meeting was an opportunity for many of the people taking part to meet each other for the first time
- Meeting two: myths around local voluntary and statutory services were discussed and in some cases found to be untrue. The group began to suggest possible initiatives that would help to achieve their aims
- Meeting three: in the final meeting the group selected the initiatives they wanted to pursue and drew up plans to put them into action.

Taskforce action plan

Two action plans were drawn up, one to hold diversionary youth activities in the local park and the other to hold a community festival on the estate. Both plans included time commitments from residents and service providers. They also involved bids for local 'Community Chest' funding and further meetings with local councillors and groups to secure support for the initiatives.

Lessons learnt from the Haringey Taskforce pilot

Challenges:

- Meeting residents not involved in nearby community groups was difficult and it was only through door-to-door surveys that it was possible to get their views
- Evening meetings are convenient for people in work but often more difficult for elderly people, particularly on dark winter evenings. Equally, engagement with young people needs dedicated resources

- Some people came to the Taskforce with strong personal priorities or agendas. At times it was difficult to steer this project on a neutral course.

Positives:

- The meetings gave the group a chance to explore myths and the particular frustrations they had, such as who was able to use the community centres or when nearby houses were due to be refurbished
- People had a chance to meet each other and form helpful networks where they shared interests
- The group was quick to reach a consensus about their priorities for the estate
- The informal and sometimes non-verbal style of meetings gave more people the confidence to speak.

Chesnut Estate, Haringey

CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

- The Neighbourhood Taskforce model is designed to help neighbourhoods acknowledge and tackle underlying, sometimes subtle, areas of conflict. This is sometimes between community groups, residents and service providers or between all three. Often misunderstanding is the root cause
- Dealing with tensions is rarely easy, nor comfortable. However, conflict can be a good thing. It can force us to reassess why and how we do things. Dealing with it positively in local communities can help residents and service providers develop new ways of working
- In an increasingly crowded urban landscape, with more diverse and less stable populations and scarcer resources for local government and other service providers, the challenges posed by neighbourhood conflicts can be considerable. This kind of community conflict requires a simple but effective approach to bring it into the open, and work towards alleviating it. Neighbourhood Taskforces will not provide the answer to resolving community conflict but they can play a part by demonstrating the value of different sections of the community, service providers and local organisations working together to resolve a common problem
- Our experience of using the model in two inner-city areas is that pulling together different people with a variety of perspectives and supporting them to work together can be effective. We found that through a combination of independent research to identify local concerns, dedicated facilitation of meetings involving committed local people and a time-limited series of meetings, we were able

to build the capacity of local people to work together on their own solutions to these concerns. From observation this had an impact on the attitudes of the individuals involved at the time. Those individuals will influence their neighbours and colleagues – whether this is long lasting will depend in part on whether the initiative they designed together is successful and also on whether this positive approach to working together can be replicated in other aspects of community life

- The pilots in both Tower Hamlets and Haringey demonstrate that, despite the complex nature of the neighbourhoods involved, relatively cheap and simple solutions can help people to work together by:
  - focusing on a single issue for a short time
  - creating meetings which are more active with less talking
  - making sure that different views are incorporated into an initial research phase so people are reassured that their voice has been heard
  - encouraging people to get to know their neighbours
  - valuing small community-based projects as well as improvements to mainstream service provision.
- In each of the two pilot areas the Young Foundation acted as a researcher and a facilitator. Our neutrality may have been a factor in the success of the pilots. However we did not have the advantage of local knowledge and contacts that a locality officer or Neighbourhood Manager using the model in other areas would have. Local workers may be best placed to deliver such initiatives. However the difficulty of staying neutral and being perceived as neutral should not be underestimated
- Acknowledging and addressing conflict is an important part of ensuring that communities have the capacity, energy and resilience to deal with future change. The Neighbourhood Taskforces toolkit provides a simple and logical framework to structure such efforts.

Canalside, Limehouse
The metal planters below right were originally benches, the use of which became a source of contention locally

Construction of new housing, Limehouse

ABOUT THE YOUNG FOUNDATION

The Young Foundation combines creativity and entrepreneurship to tackle major social needs. We work on many different levels to achieve positive social change – including advocacy, research, and policy influence as well as creating new organisations and running practical projects. The Foundation benefits from a long history of social research, innovation and practical action by the late Michael Young, once described as "the world's most successful social entrepreneur" who created more than 60 ventures which address social needs.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

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Haringey Council

Tower Hamlets Partnership

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NEIGHBOURHOOD TASKFORCES
A TOOL FOR DEALING WITH CONFLICT IN COMMUNITIES

The Neighbourhood Taskforce model draws on a combination of familiar approaches: research into local people's views, fast-paced meetings, mediation techniques and action planning, which when used together can help build the capacity of the community to work with each other and local agencies to create their own solutions to the problems in their communities.