

Story: Thamesmead case study, Bexley Council

Bexley Council had amongst the lowest cohesion levels in London.¹ The borough had developed new approaches to improving community engagement as part of a Capital Ambition² funded project, Communication, Cohesion and Trust.

In October 2009, Moses Nteyoho was murdered in Thamesmead, an estate in the north of the borough with serious cohesion issues. Immediately after the murder, there was an eruption of anger in the community about the perceived slow and inadequate response of the authorities – police, ambulance services and the council.

This was a pressure-cooker environment, creating a highly volatile local situation. The council took the lead. They hosted events for local people to vent frustrations, and built some foundations for sustainable improvement in the medium term. Key elements of their strategy included:

1. Quickly held public meeting

The Capital Ambition work the council had done before the murder to understand underlying issues and build relationships with influencers in the community equipped them to perform a leadership role and co-ordinate activity on behalf of several agencies. This included holding a public meeting.

2. Resilience and existing insight

Previous insight work had equipped council staff to be resilient in the face of anger and hostility. They recognised that emotion was driving behaviour and were able to deploy emotionally intelligent skills to deal with it and develop rapport.

3. Influence and information channels

The authority recognised that public agencies didn't have the confidence and trust of residents. They sought to reach out to those with influence and trust within the community. Although they continued to disseminate information through formal and traditional channels, the process of reaching out to community leaders and asking them to help communicate key messages became the main way of getting information out to disengaged residents.

¹ Bexley had the third lowest level of agreement in outer London in the 2008-09 Place Survey (a survey of local resident opinion) to the question 'To what extent do people from different backgrounds get on well together?'

² Capital Ambition was established in 2008 by London Councils as the regional improvement and efficiency partnership for London. Capital Ambition has led and supported London local authorities in realising greater efficiency, performance improvement, innovation and new ways of working together to deliver local public services in the boroughs

Contents

Foreword

Introduction

Which hat are
you wearing?

Context

Section 1:
The Basics

Section 2.1:
Trust and democracy

Section 2.2:
Trust in the community

Section 2.3:
Trust in the system

4. Openness and transparency

The most vocal critics amongst residents were brought together. They were invited to work with the authorities to establish exactly what had happened on the night in question with regard to the response of the emergency services. Residents were played the actual recordings of 999 calls and the interaction between police and ambulance services and encouraged to think through how the situation could have been dealt with differently.

5. Establishing and maintaining relationships

A second public meeting was held where residents reported back on what they had found. This succeeded in transforming the atmosphere and began the process of building confidence. Residents who had undertaken the research were asked to carry on in their role as links between the authorities and residents. A high proportion agreed to do this.

6. Co-ordination among agencies

A network of 'community communicators' in Thamesmead was established. These were a key part of the transformation in the relationships between residents and public agencies.

In the aftermath, [this short video](#) was produced, setting out the impact of the approach taken.

The episode demonstrated the importance of having meaningful relationships with, and understanding of, the community to start with. It also showed the importance of actually speaking to people rather than relying on more traditional means of communications such as paper surveys.

By reaching into the community and identifying the angriest people, the council was able to turn frustration into something more constructive. In this instance, they weren't hard-to-reach but their anger made them initially unwilling to listen. The decision to engage this group took real courage.

In their response, meanwhile, the council worked hard to establish better joined up thinking with agencies and services like the police, and to capture the things they learnt from doing so.

Contents

Foreword

Introduction

Which hat are
you wearing?

Context

Section 1:
The Basics

Section 2.1:
Trust and democracy

Section 2.2:
Trust in the community

Section 2.3:
Trust in the system