

The Street Weapon's Commission

Jim McMillan

Fay Selvan

Welcome Jim McMillan from Great Places Housing Group. Thank you for coming to the Commission. So what do you as an architect and someone from a housing background have to tell us about street gun and knife crime?

Jim McMillan

Well I was an architect and I worked for a housing association so I've slightly changed my role. And for the last ten years or so I've been working on a scheme called North Mar. it's an area in south Manchester called Long Sight INAUDIBLE and there was an area there which our housing association had probably about 200 houses in a completely mixed area. There was lots of private landlords renting houses out. We had a lot of houses there. There was people who'd lived there for a long time. There were people who'd just moved into the area but the common theme it was what we call at the time in a spiral of decline. There was a lot of crime in the area ten years ago. House prices had really dropped down which was our main concern at the outset because we had over 200 houses that were worth virtually nothing. There were other areas in Manchester where the decision had been made to demolish the whole lot. But what we did was in partnership with the City Council we tried to see if we could come up with solutions that would keep the area vibrant alive and try and rescue it really.

Fay Selvan

What contributed to the spiral of decline? What were the key issues?

Jim McMillan

I think one of the major things is Manchester is a big student area. And that

traditionally when I went to college in Manchester and a lot of my friends lived in houses around the North Mar area. They stopped doing that and it's become much more of an industry, student housing in the city centre. So a lot of the landlords who were renting out to reliable students who paid their money and everything were suddenly faced with the fact that they had to rent out to anyone they could. And they were renting out to people who probably we wouldn't like to rent out. They weren't getting the money. They weren't putting the investment into the properties. They weren't integrating in with the rest of the community and you were getting a lot of people who were complaining about the next door neighbours who were you know dossing around and things like that. I think that was a major contribution. It was the same in Salford as well. The traditional student housing moved into the city centre. I think the other issues were there was a fair amount of unemployment around that time. and it was just a general lack of confidence in the area.

Fay Selvan

And was crime an issue?

Jim McMillan

It was an issue yeah. Part of our work was to set up steering groups working with the residents and working with the police and the city council and everyone who had an influence in the area. We tried to set up a real sort of partnership and we'd get reports from the police officers at these meetings that would say about crime going on in the area. There was gun crime as well. And I think that contributed to the lack of confidence in the area.

Fay Selvan

So what have you done as a housing association then to help tackle gun and

knife crime in those areas?

Jim McMillan

We're on the periphery of that issue of crime. What we were involved in was the sort of overall holistic regeneration of the area. We looked at it, not just us, with the city council and with whoever else we could get funding from or assistance from. I think that's a major issue is to make sure you get as many people as possible involved and make sure that the funding that you do have from various sources is pooled and used in an effective way rather than just, the term they use is silos, and people say no that's our money for this and this is our money, but just to get the money more fluid. And I think we probably bent some rules in that way. But there was two ways that we went around it really. First was physical improvements. We did a thing called Home Zones which hadn't been tried before. We did improve street lighting. Small things like that. A big issue for us was that most of the houses there are two bedroom houses and there's a growing Asian population there who wanted four and five bedroom houses sometimes and they were living in a two bedroom house. So the only way that they could get a bigger house was to move from the area. So you weren't keeping people in the area. You weren't keeping their children in the schools. They were moving on. There was a lot of turnover of people and it's just not good for a community to have that much turnover. So there was quite a few physical things. We did environmental improvements. We tidied up the area. But the other aspect of this was the social side where we had an old building that was in the area. We made that into our social and community centre. We had a lot of our activities like housing workshops and things happen there. All the consultation on the works that we did happened in the community centre. We put flats above it which changed the people that were living in the area. We had young professionals living in the area rather than just the standard two bedroom houses. We did a lot of our neighbourhood management. We

started neighbourhood management from that centre as well. So that gave us the base and the flagship in the area and a symbol almost of what was going on.

Fay Selvan

Ian did you want to?

Ian

I was quite aware that you said there was a lot of crime involved prior to the development were there any partners that were co-opted in to help to deal with that side of the whole issue because from my view putting a brand new house or redeveloping an area without having an input or a change of mindset of the people involved you will end up back at square one in a very short space of time. So did you co-opt any sort of agencies within the local area or did the people come together to form some sort of agency to attack the issue of crime and violence around the area?

Jim McMillan

I think we knew right from the outset that physical regeneration wasn't going to solve the areas problems. And it had happened in other parts of Manchester where all the houses looked lovely. The streets were lovely. Tidied up. And the area still went downhill and I think they've been demolished now. And we were trying to learn from those mistakes. And the phrase we used at the time was beyond our own doorstep which was like we couldn't just have a lovely house that was warm and nicely insulated and everything like that and the area wasn't being looked at socially. So I'd say the main thing that we bought in with the city council was the neighbourhood wardens. It wasn't specifically to tackle the crime but what we called them was the eyes and ears of the neighbourhood. And what that did was it gave a lot of people who were in situations where they were beside an anti

social household who were frightened. Didn't want to be seen to be. They would phone the police. The police would come round with the sirens going and suddenly the neighbours knew that you'd reported them. So they were almost like an interface between the police and the community. That was their initial role. They went around patrolling, just keeping an eye on people dumping rubbish and things like that, because that's the sort of thing that just saps the confidence out of an area. So they did that. Then they moved on. in the last few years they've gone on to do a lot of work with the schools in the area. Trying to deal and talk to the young children at an early age. They've set up a youth club in our community centre now which is going great guns. And I'm amazed that that's one of the last things we've done. I'd say that's one of the first things we should have done. They do things like litter picks with local kids so that the kids at an early age realise that it's not very nice to dump rubbish because some kids just don't get that example from anyone in the family. And just to be told basic ground rules about good citizenship really.

Fay Selvan

Mark?

Mark

you talked about holistically and community you've mentioned but my question was about how was the existing community consulted in the whole regeneration process? How did that work?

Jim McMillan

In every way you can think of actually. Reaching the hard to reach is the phrase we've used because there were people who just weren't interested in any of the consultations we were doing. So we had to think up different ways to do it. And there was the old people. You had the typical thing we're going to

do something in your area, come to the village hall and we'll talk about it. And you get the same faces turning up to every one of those meetings and they're normally the elderly people who have high morals, lived there all their lives, want to see something happen. The people you don't reach are the ones who you really want to talk to and that's generally the younger people. And it seems to be like the 20 to 40 year olds don't turn up to these things either. So there's quite a big group that we didn't get to meet in the usual way. So we set up things like what we called the North Mar urban arts project who, as well as their own thing which was things like doing painting projects or making videos or projects like that, we used them as a way of almost getting people to consult with us without knowing that they're doing that. And they would do things like street parties. And at the street party we would have people asking questions about the schemes that we were proposing. Full scale mock ups. For example the Home Zones which is like a shared service we had full scale mock ups so people could actually see what a home zone was in reality. And at the same time the artists would be having performers playing or one of the houses we'd give over to them and they made it into an art gallery and it was using local artists who'd done paintings and stuff. And these people came out of the woodwork that we didn't know existed until we started digging into the area. And people coming forward and saying actually I do some art. And some fantastic art. And from that an art gallery was built which ran for a few years. We had a radio station for a few weeks running in the area and various people went in and did their own shows from it. People hung around the radio station. It got a lot of interest and from that you started talking to people. You made links. And it's all about making links. And I think one of the best things that came out of the consultation was not just the end product but that you ended up with a lot of people who hadn't met each other before in the area were building links with each other. From one street that hadn't spoken to the other street and suddenly they were both sometimes united against what we were

doing. But at least it was getting them united in some way.

Fay Selvan

Thank you.

Gus

How constant has the population of the area been? In other words the people in the restored houses are they the same people who lived there before or have you attempted some social engineering so that you have upwardly mobile people, the elderly, ex offenders, how does that work?

Jim McMillan

I think the phrase we used at the beginning was the demand for our rented property was shallow. I think that was a euphemism really because you couldn't let them really. They'd go anywhere but there. What we've got now is about a one and half, two year waiting list. I think it's not just because of what we've done but I think there's a general increase in demand for social housing. But it's a great situation to be in. We've got results from surveys and things like that where at the beginning 90% of them were saying we don't want to live in this area. If given the chance we'd want to move out. Now that's down to about 30% which is incredible.

Fay Selvan

What's the profile of those people?

Jim McMillan

Everything. It's increasingly becoming popular with the Asian population. The other side of the Stockport Road there's a lot of Asian people live there. They see it as a safe stable area. They're moving into this area and we've made that more possible because there's bigger houses. We've done various

things. We've knocked down a fair number of houses and built bigger houses for rent. I think most of those houses went to the larger Asian families who had the greatest demand for them. We've now just about to finish a scheme that was helped by English Partnerships where we've done the same thing but again these are for sale. And we're asking nearly 200 thousand pound for these houses in an area where houses were less than ten thousand pounds ten years ago so there's been a big shift in confidence in the area. People will come and live here now and invest the money in the area as well.

Fay Selvan

Well thank you very much Jim McMillan. Just before you go one last question. If there's one thing that you think should be done to help reduce crime, particularly gun and knife crime what do you think it should be?

Jim McMillan

I think you're right the physical improvements and the millions that were spent in the area is important but I think the ongoing funding for the sort of projects that are going in the area needs to carry on. And it's a drop in the ocean compared to the money spent on physical improvements. That has to happen though. And I think the community wardens is the best value for money that I've seen out of all the things we've done. And we struggle from year in year out we're struggling for funding for that. But I think it's the thing that's got the most confidence. People have the most confidence in the area because of that. And I think that if that was the one thing we would do in an area that would be number one now.

Fay Selvan

Thank you. Thank you very much.

CUT