

NOVEMBER 2004

# POLICY NOTE PREVENTING ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IN PUBLIC SPACES

CABE Space believes that investing in the creation and care of high quality public spaces is more effective in tackling anti-social behaviour than the blanket use of tough security measures. CABE Space is concerned that adopting measures such as CCTV and security gates without considering the overall design and care of public space will result in the creation of ugly, oppressive environments that can foster greater social problems. The answer is to prioritise the design, staffing and maintenance of public space.



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Above: Vandalised fencing before clean up operations in Southwark (London Borough of Southwark) Below: Wardens patrolling in Mile End Park (London Borough of Tower Hamlets) Cover: Staff keep Mowbray Park well maintained and welcoming (Sunderland City Council)



## THE PROBLEM

The vast majority (91%) of the public believes that parks and public spaces improve people's quality of life.<sup>1</sup>

The government is committed to tackling social problems and creating better environments in our towns and cities. In the Prime Minister's words, "We need stronger local communities and an improved local quality of life. Streets where parents feel safe to let their children walk to school. Where people want to use the parks. Where graffiti, vandalism, litter and dereliction is not tolerated."<sup>2</sup>

Research commissioned by CABA Space reveals the extent of the challenge. Community groups estimate that 31% of parks suffer from unacceptably high levels of vandalism and behaviour related problems. Around 60% of local authorities are seen by these groups to have achieved very limited or practically no success in tackling the problem.<sup>3</sup>

Government initiatives such as **Cleaner Safer Greener Communities**<sup>4</sup> have been set in place to address the issues facing neighbourhoods today. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's publication, **Safer Places**,<sup>5</sup> offers guidance to planners, architects and developers to make streets, homes and parks safer places. What is also needed is consideration of how ongoing maintenance and staffing can safeguard this investment by preventing physical decline and the subsequent onset of anti-social behaviour.

## SOLUTIONS

CABA Space has seen two approaches emerge to the problem of anti-social behaviour in public spaces. Both aim to tackle behaviour by changing the environment, but use very different methods:

- 'Target hardening': the redesign of facilities and equipment to make them near indestructible, and less susceptible to theft, vandalism and abuse
- 'Place making': investing in good design, attractive new facilities and good maintenance to create public spaces that the community will want to use and enjoy

## THE CHOICE

CABE Space believes that the use of target hardening as a first response to anti-social behaviour is resulting in the fortification of our urban environment. There is a better solution: invest in place making, improving public spaces, to prevent the onset and escalation of these problems. Evidence from CABE Space's study shows that well designed, well maintained public spaces can contribute to reducing the incidence of vandalism and anti-social behaviour, and result in long term cost savings.<sup>6</sup>

## THE EVIDENCE FOR PLACE MAKING

The study examines the experiences of 10 park managers, 22 local authorities and 75 community groups working to improve public spaces. The results show a real impact on anti-social behaviour through:

- Improving quality standards through regular maintenance and good design
- Investing in on-site staff to maintain the park and deter anti-social activity

This research builds on the influential 'broken window theory', which argues that people's behaviour adapts to the environment surrounding them.<sup>7</sup> Not only are these measures successful in tackling low-level anti-social behaviour, but they can also prevent the occurrence of more serious criminal behaviour such as drug dealing.

The research also shows that initial investment in the quality of the park brings long-term savings. Eleven per cent of parks' maintenance budgets is spent on repairing or replacing vandalised or misused items in parks – an estimated £64m each year across the UK.<sup>8</sup> Time and again the study shows that initial spending to improve the quality of the park brings reductions in these costs.

## APPROACHES THAT WORK

Approaches that are successful include:

- Responding rapidly to problems such as vandalism, sending a clear message that abuse will not be tolerated
- Reinstating park keepers and park wardens to reassure visitors while discouraging anti-social behaviour

- Reasserting the clarity of design with open vistas and clear sight lines
- Fully engaging the community – including groups creating problems – in the process of reclaiming the park

So, the benefits of investing in public space can be three-fold:

- Successfully tackling problems of anti-social behaviour
- Achieving long term cost savings
- Creating the neighbourhoods in which we all want to live

## CASE STUDY ONE

**In 1995 Oldham Metropolitan District Council began a park refurbishment programme. Funding was redirected from an uncoordinated winter works programme and by concentrating restoration efforts in one park at a time they have restored 12 parks – four have won Green Flag Awards. The development of community pride and the establishment of parks' friends groups as 'eyes and ears' have seen dramatic improvements in levels of anti-social behaviour.**

## WHAT ROLE FOR TARGET HARDENING?

Target hardening in public spaces is seen increasingly by the public, policy makers and the media as the most effective way to prevent low level problems of anti-social behaviour from escalating. Gated communities that exclude non-residents are growing in popularity, and government funding of CCTV has increased dramatically over the past few years. £170m was allocated for CCTV schemes between 1999 and 2003. This accounts for more than three-quarters of total spending on crime prevention.<sup>9</sup>

Evidence for the effectiveness of some of these security measures is inconclusive. NACRO argues that there is very little robust evidence to support the boom in the use of CCTV, finding it particularly ineffective in preventing public disorder offences. A comprehensive review of government spending on CCTV revealed the overall reduction in crime was only five per cent. A parallel review carried out by the Home Office that looked at the effectiveness of street lighting, however, found a reduction in crime of 20%.

**Security without the spikes**,<sup>10</sup> a resource pack created for the Home Office's £2.3m scheme **Operation Gate It** gives the example of two tower blocks in London to illustrate the impact of aggressive security measures. One block put up small picket fences and created a community garden. A residents' association organised events and gardening rotas. A block 500 yards away put up seven-foot high solid fencing, concreted the area and put in a playing field. This latter block, which appears safer, actually had higher crime levels, higher disorder, graffiti, nuisance and vandalism and more people reporting fear of crime.

Initiatives such as **Operation Gate It** advocate a balanced approach, encouraging the use of security measures including gates, bollards, fencing and CCTV only where appropriate. However, the strong headline message and the scheme's high profile may bolster the belief that tough security measures are the only effective response to problems of anti-social behaviour. The growing climate of fear in which decisions are made to protect our urban environment helps to tip the balance; choices are not always based on a rational analysis of threat.

## CASE STUDY TWO

**Sunderland City Council has been centrally involved with community safety partnerships, holding regular meetings between the Council and the police, and checking progress on specific incidents of anti-social behaviour. A park warden service now patrols all of the major parks in Sunderland, and an effort to involve young people in a local arts project has proved a major success. The programme has resulted in the cost of vandalism to the city's parks falling from around £50,000 a year to a few thousand pounds.**

## CABE SPACE RECOMMENDS THAT

- Local authorities should invest in the good design, staffing and maintenance of public spaces to tackle problems of anti-social behaviour, or to prevent the start of a downward spiral
- Security measures and target hardening should not be used as the only response to problems of anti-social behaviour in public space, but should be employed selectively where they will be effective, and as part of a co-ordinated approach
- The government should build on the cross-departmental work already done through **Cleaner Safer Greener Communities** to ensure that a consistent message is given to local authorities about how to tackle anti-social behaviour. This message, and associated funding streams, should prioritise investment in long-term measures to improve the quality of the environment, and recommend that target hardening and CCTV are used selectively.

## NOTES

- 1 MORI 2004
- 2 Prime Minister, Croydon, April 2001, from Living Places, Cleaner Safer Greener
- 3 The link between the quality of parks and behaviour, GreenSpace 2004
- 4 [www.cleanersafereener.gov.uk](http://www.cleanersafereener.gov.uk)
- 5 Safer Places: The Planning System and Crime Prevention, ODPM April 2004
- 6 The link between the quality of parks and behaviour, GreenSpace 2004
- 7 Wilson and Kelling, 1982
- 8 Urban Green Spaces Taskforce Working Group 6
- 9 To CCTV or not to CCTV?, National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) May 2002
- 10 Security without the spikes, Groundwork 2004



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CABE Space is part of CABE, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. CABE Space aims to bring excellence to the design, management and maintenance of parks and public space in our towns and cities.