High Street Safer Neighbourhood Team

Ward Panel Agenda

7pm Tuesday 7th May 2019 – Mall Offices

1. **Meeting Guidelines**:
   - Listen respectfully without interruption
   - Give way to the chair
   - We continually aim to improve what we do and are open to new ideas.
2. **Volunteer to take minutes?**
3. **Apologies**:
   -
4. **Minutes**:
   - (See http://www.walthamsoft.com/high-st-snt/AgendaMinutes/PDF/2019-0226-Minutes.pdf **Corrections**?
   - **Review Actions**
5. **Briefing from Cllr. Ahsan Khan on the availability and usage of CCTV**
6. **Report from the Police team**.
7. **Street Harassment of Women** – see appendix to this Agenda
8. **AOB**
   .
9. Next meeting? **????**

Appointment of Chair & Vice-Chair (normally elected annually in November meeting).

Street Harassment of Women

Introduction

I've been Chair (now happily Co-Chair) of the High Street police ward panel for something like 15 years. One issue that has kept on surfacing is the **sexual harassment** of women and girls in our streets. I'm entirely satisfied that it's a real problem, and it's a problem affecting women here in particular. Only this week I saw an account on Facebook about an alarming incident in Hatherley Road.

An aside: *There are those who believe no man can possibly understand "what it's like". I really don't buy that. You only have to watch the (multi-layered) video at* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgw6y3cH7tA *to squirm at the palpable pressure, and if we couldn't put ourselves in others' shoes then surely wouldn't all Drama be meaningless?*

Police in Waltham Forest have always been very ready to listen to accounts and concerns, but on each of the occasions that the ward panel has gone into this issue the same set of obstacles has emerged. Police simply don't get enough reports either to identify specific offenders and "hot spots", or even to justify the allocation of scarce resources - even though it's clear that the problem is acknowledged. Indeed, last year the BBC reported:

> "Chief Constable Sara Thornton said forces were too stretched to deal with "deserving" issues, such as logging gender-based hate incidents. … Ms Thornton said that while treating misogyny as a hate crime is a concern for some well-organised organisations … (forces) do not have the resources to do everything."

It's hard to argue there is no truth in those words. However, my own view remains that this problem cannot be successfully addressed without police support. So I'll go on to consider what might be done to facilitate appropriate intervention by police (Part 1 - a Technological Approach), and also to consider what else might be done at a community level (Part 2 - Community Education).

Part 1 - a Technological Approach

Police can't do much more unless we can increase the number of relevant reports by victims. Yet the number of reports is very small indeed - and seems to bear little relation to the number of incidents. It may be that women are inured to being pestered, or that they have little confidence in the ability or readiness of police to act - or very possibly both. But of course that's a classic "chicken and egg" situation.

Reporting an incident of this kind is difficult, unless the level of threat is such that a 999 call is appropriate. 101 can be a slow process, beginning with a recorded message, even when queues are short. It certainly isn't easy to use online reporting via the Met website when out in the street, and needing to maintain vigilance. Twitter is a fumble under these circumstances. Something else is needed if women are going to start capturing the raw data that has to be provided if police are going to get a handle on the problem.

So what's needed? Clearly, for incidents where there is a fear of harm, 999 is the only choice. But for the "nuisance" approaches - which individually may not seem serious but which cumulatively diminish the quality of women's lives, I guess the theoretical ideal is a "button", which when discreetly pressed, logs somewhere the fact of an undesired encounter, with time and location, so that aggregated clusters of these incidents in time or location can be identified.

The most practical implementation of that would seem to be some mechanism on a smartphone - which so many people already carry. So is there anything already out there that can be adapted?

- Twitter might seem attractive initially, but it involves concentrating on the screen and typing. Someone being pestered in the street needs to be attending almost entirely to what's going on around them.
- One suggestion has been that a Chat-bot (of the type used in WF for reporting fly-tipping) could be created. The problem with that is that it's still too interactive. You don't want to be puzzling over responses from the server to work out what next to type or select, while eyes are still on you.
- A custom web-page, with buttons, sliders, icons etc. (minimal text) might work - but the unreliability of a network connection could make the process seem precarious under already stressful circumstances.
- That seems to leave an appropriate **App** as the way to go - one which is easily familiarised, which exploits the smartphone's location capabilities, and which can buffer data until a connection is available.

What would an ideal App look like? Here are my suggestions.

- Firstly, it should (ideally) have the option to be invoked by a hardware operation - if I double-click the Home button on my phone the camera comes up, whether or not the device is locked. Some devices may be able to configure a user-selected app in this way.
- Secondly - it should register time and location as soon as it's invoked (with a subsequent Cancel option, in case of error) which is transmitted to the server as soon as connectivity allows. This could allow a community safety officer monitoring the server dashboard "live" to observe mapped incidents in near-real-time, with incident flags changing size and colour as they "age". This monitoring need only be done when deemed "necessary" - minimising resource implications.
- It should lend itself to subsequent "annotation", so that victims could add details of incident type, offender characteristics, and so on only when it's safe to do so, all to be aggregated on the server for later analysis. It should also be possible to initiate an incident report at any time after the event, by entering a time and (recent?) date.
- Full details of incidents should probably only be accessible to the originating user and the server operators, but the app should display whenever open a map of recent incidents (perhaps for the current day, or the current hour), so that women can *avoid* problem locations, possibly with recency indicated by the colour of the "dots" on the map display. This "anonymised" data could also be published to a web-page - something like the way Flightradar24.com displays live aircraft movements.
- It should offer a prominent button to call 999 anywhere within the app.
- It should record:
  - User name and contact details (stored)
  - Location (automatic, or selected on map)
  - Time (current, or adjusted)
  - Incident type (select from options, with default)
  - Distress level caused (slider, or options)
  - Whether the suspected offender is known to the reporter (yes/no)
  - Whether that person has been the subject of a previous report (yes/no)
  - Whether the reporter agrees to be contacted for follow-up (yes/no)
  - Characteristics of suspected offender (options)
  - Other details (free-form text)

So is there anything like that already out there? I was impressed by the App "Self-Evident" which at the very least demonstrates some of the concepts set out here. Unfortunately it is unfunded at present. I was involved in initial trials (in Waltham Forest) of another App "City Risks" which similarly sought to share safety intelligence among a community of users. I have to say I was unable to make this app function as specified despite valiant efforts, but I believe there is significant potential there. Of course, the very best results would come from an App tailored as precisely as possible to this particular problem. I note (after a speculative search) that the web-domain LeaveMeBe.net is currently available for registration.

As the reader may detect, I do have some experience of designing processes something like this, and the user interfaces which support them. However, my experience as a developer/coder is now very dated indeed, and while I'd be happy to work with a developer on the requirement specification, and testing, any eventual development should be done by someone immersed in current mobile technology (much as I might enjoy updating old skills). I'm similarly not in a position to estimate likely costs, but it's conceivable that these might be within the parameters of the funding available through the Borough's Safer Neighbourhood Board. Quotes should be obtained - if thought appropriate - from established developers. If this concept ever is implemented, I'd like my contribution to be attributed, so for vanity, rather than gain, I'd like to assert my right to be recognised as the author of this outline design.

Part 2 - Community Education

Part 1 was about identifying and mapping offences, and also preventing offences by enabling women to avoid current hot-spots. This section goes into what might be done to extinguish the problem at a deeper level. That means influencing the behaviour of those who are currently creating the problem.

My (possibly unfashionable) view is that "traditional" responses, including protest and demonstrations, are woefully ineffective. In fact, in a "laddish" culture that often prevails, it's easy to discount or even ridicule protests - which is of course entirely counter-productive, possibly enhancing "swagger". We need to focus on what might genuinely effect change in the individuals who are potential offenders, and that means seeing the world through their eyes.

My own view is that the most powerful external influence on behaviour is peer-pressure. If you accept that, then it means that the solution to the problem lies not with women, but by reaching out to men. This isn't an easy thing to do - the recent (magnificent) advertising campaign by Gillette in the USA created a ("laddish"?) backlash, to my own very deep sorrow. Nevertheless, our goal must be that a potential offender ends up being told "That's not nice" or "We don't do that" by his peers. That's the sort of pressure which has successfully driven down everyday racism and everyday homophobia in less than a generation. It's achievable. "Building-site" misogyny has become much rarer.

We can't ignore the "heritage" dimension to this problem. Waltham Forest has welcomed migrants from all over the globe, but of course some have grown up immersed in cultures where the perception and expectations towards women is very different from those of 21st Century Britain. In some cases there is a perception that "western women" don't aspire to the "standards" absorbed as "normal", and so may not be "deserving" of respect (with notorious consequences). I believe we have been failing to make the essential and necessary narrative which challenges that perception.

This is, of course, very sensitive territory, and I believe it's *essential* to work with "heritage experts" to attune the message correctly. But we do need to find a way to convey truths such as the fact that

"Western Women" expect to be able to assert their femininity visibly but that this does *not* imply any sort of invitation. We need to affirm that invariably women want only to be left alone; that even a suggestion of sexual advances is almost always highly distasteful and will very often constitute an offence. I am *not* a heritage expert of any kind, but I rather think that the traditions which have sometimes been associated with this problem do involve strong elements of respect for "Mothers, Sisters, Daughters" and that an appeal on the right lines could make a difference.

So I'm speculating that - with the greatest care - there could be a role for posters, to be displayed in cafés, mosques, shops, and anywhere that might reach those susceptible to misunderstanding. Again, and vitally, we need help to gauge the "pitch", but a message "We respect women", and something like "Don't be a creep" could make a difference. I rather think (having grown up myself in the 60's) that many "offenders" are not necessarily malicious or aggressive so much as misguided, and that a very significant improvement in the quality of life of women in Waltham Forest could yet be achieved with the right campaign. I'd speculate that we could halve the number of unwanted approaches in three years. Let's give it a go.

Philip Herlihy
2 May 2019