

'Adopt a Street' in Offenbach: Turning complainers into co-producers

 Innovation image

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Organisation: GBO Gemeinnützige Baugesellschaft mbH Offenbach

Country: Germany

Level of government: Local government

Sector: Public order and safety

Type: Communication, Partnerships, Public Service

Launched in: 2007

Overall development time: 3 month(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

Offenbach, a city close to Frankfurt with about 120 000 residents, has started turning things around: fed up with the bad press and complaints about the local living environment, the directly elected mayor, Herr Schneider, decided to take action. In 2007 he launched the initiative "better living in Offenbach", in partnership with the local utility company and other public agencies.

This also involved a communication campaign to give the signal to citizens "we care but you must do your part as well". As many "before-and-after" photos demonstrate, the living environment in many disadvantaged neighbourhoods has improved significantly due to the involvement of local citizens. Survey data also demonstrate that overall people now feel safer.

Why the innovation was developed

- To improve the living environment of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Offenbach.
 - Encourage citizens to play an active role in maintaining their neighbourhoods.
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Objectives

Enhance public trust, Improve effectiveness, Improve social equity, Improve user satisfaction, Increase citizen engagement

- The key objective of the initiative was to improve the quality of life in Offenbach, with a particular focus on disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Even though the local council had engaged in various improvement activities in the past, these had remained largely unnoticed by the public and the local press.
 - Therefore, it was decided to take a new approach which involved partnership working with the local utility company, the police and other public agencies. Another important innovation was co-production with local people. It was also important to the mayor to improve transparency.
 - As Herr Schneider stated "This initiative aims at giving local people, schools and communities more responsibility for their neighbourhood. But this is only going to work if the local council does its homework as well. A citizen who complains about fly tipping on the internet should be able to read shortly afterwards on our website what we have done about this. And the results need to be documented on our homepage on a continuous basis."
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Main beneficiaries

Civil Society, General population, Low-income groups

- Offenbach residents
- City of Offenbach

Results

Effectiveness

- The utility company wanted to find out what the citizens in Offenbach thought about the changes. It distributed a questionnaire at the Christmas Market in 2007. Altogether 179 questionnaire were returned and analysed.
- The results show an upward trend for improvement – in particular young people (up to 45 years) thought that cleanliness has improved even though, in general, citizens were still dissatisfied with the overall level of cleanliness. Most citizens thought that safety has improved as well (in particular women).

Development

Design

The project was started in May 2007 with a pilot in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. Staff of the local council, utility company and local people engaged in clean-ups, painting and weeding for three months. In the meantime the initiative has been extended to four neighbourhoods.

Implementation

Tools used:

- Many improvements have been made. For example, many street switch boxes of the electricity utility which had been covered in posters and graffiti have been cleaned up, while others boxes have been redesigned for advertising or arts projects.
- Furthermore, lighting poles have been cleaned up and painted and green areas along streets have been planted. The walls of subways and public buildings have been cleaned of graffiti. Indeed, whole public places have been given a complete going-over. Local companies acted as sponsors in these efforts and schools undertook arts projects in the areas concerned.
- The clean-ups were accompanied by public campaigns – for example on the issue of dogs and dog fouling. Special bins for dog droppings were installed on streets and, in addition, fines of EUR 50 were introduced for those who would not make use of the new facilities. Schools joined initiatives such as "Clean Hessen" and launched arts festivals for children. Another new initiative was the launch of neighbourhood offices with a neighbourhood cafe where local people could talk to the community organiser responsible for their neighbourhood'.

Resources used:

- The project has been financed with a small budget. Apart from a full-time job for the project manager – Sabine Süßmann – the costs invested in each neighbourhood are EUR 60 000 – 100 000. This mainly includes investment costs for bringing about improvements but also PR.
- Clearly, public spaces which are taken care of require less maintenance. However, there have been no direct savings, since before the initiative nobody took care of public spaces and just accepted the run-down state of the local environment.
- All in all, the initiative has improved the quality of life of local people in disadvantaged areas with little financial investment and built up social capital.
- After a three-month "action phase" a community organiser was recruited in each neighbourhood from the ranks of local people. This person acts as bridge between the neighbourhood and the professional project manager working for the utility company. Furthermore, 42 citizen mentors have been recruited, who take responsibility for specific green areas and play grounds. The mentors take care of the planting, fertilising and maintenance of specific green areas and tell the utility company when things go wrong, e.g. through vandalism.

Lessons Learned

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- The most important benefit for the utility company was the co-production of better outcomes with local citizens but also partnership working with public and private agencies. As the past showed, the utility company cannot make a big impact by acting alone.
- Of course, co-production with local communities is not always easy and often there are conflicts between citizens with their own ideas and the utility company which has to ensure that citizens act within existing regulations. For example, sometimes citizens want to go for planting of green areas which is not in line with legal requirements or too difficult for maintenance.
- However, the overall assessment is positive. Where local people have taken social responsibility and it has become visible to other citizens that people care, then there is less littering.