

A community approach to tackling crime and promoting community safety

*– based on a speech by Richard Burden MP
to the Northfield Constituency Convention*

I would like to add my thanks to those who have organised today's convention and made presentations to it.

There is a lot to celebrate in what is going on in Northfield in practice to improve the quality of life here. To make Northfield cleaner and to make people feel safer.

For all of us, though, there is still something we haven't cracked.

My office recently undertook a survey of the 1,100 new cases we took up in 2007/08. These cases came out of letters and e-mails from constituents, telephone calls, visits to my advice desks and so on – which I then took up locally or raised in parliament, with ministers or other agencies.

The biggest single issue was housing. This made up around 19% of these cases. In joint second place came health and social care issues at 14%. And grievances relating to crime and anti-social behaviour issues also made up 14%.

In one way, that crime and anti-social behaviour makes up such a high percentage of my caseload should not be surprising. Poll after poll shows these issues are right up there in the list of the public's priorities. A recent Government survey found 55% of people ranking crime and community safety as the most important issues for Britain today.

Even if it comes as no surprise that people are so concerned about crime it is perhaps worth us all stopping to think about why people's perceptions of the extent of crime in this country far outweigh the reality.

Perception and reality

Crime is down 32% since 1997. The chance of being victim of crime is at its lowest for 27 years. There are 14,000 more Police Officers and 16,000 Police Community Support Officers that did not even exist a decade ago.

These are national figures but they are borne out by the picture here in this part of Birmingham which we have already heard about today. Yes, there are local

crime hotspots – places where the reduction in crime has not been as great as elsewhere. Yes, there are some kinds of crime where the rate of incidents remains stubbornly high.

But overall, and in the majority of places, the picture is consistent. The level of crime and anti social behaviour here in the Northfield area is down and continuing to fall whether you look over the last 10 years, the last 3 years or even year on year.

So that is the objective situation – but is it how people feel about the situation? This is not just about raw statistics. So, locally, the Police have also been running a series of surveys to try to get a sense of whether people think the Police are doing a good job, if they personally feel safe outside their homes and, if they have had cause to call on the Police for assistance, how satisfied they were with the service they received.

With one exception – which I will mention later – over 80% said they felt safe and were satisfied with the work done by the Police. Some of the satisfaction scores comfortably exceeded 80% and, in some cases, they topped 90%.

So if crime is down and continues to fall, and if most people appear to be personally satisfied with the protection they get from the Police, why is it that crime still scores so highly as an issue of concern?

As Councillor Randal Brew mentioned in his opening remarks today, part of the answer lies in the role of the media. Nothing is as good a story as a bad news story. If there is a mugging in the area, you can bet on its being reported. But if there is a reduction in crime, it may well not make the news pages.

So it is partly about the media. I think another problem is the way our adversarial system of politics works. Political parties, particularly when seeking election, will often try to emphasise points of disagreement rather than agreement. If you are in government, the temptation is to talk up your achievements and downplay where things need to improve. If you are in opposition, you will often be looking to publicise those things that you can say are going wrong rather than things that are going in the right direction.

The problem is that the end result of all of this is that people don't think much of politicians on either side. There is a gap between us politicians – all of us – and the people we represent. And that gap means that people will not necessarily believe the statistics we present them with.

So there are problems with the way the media portray things. And there is a problem with the impact of the political dogfights that we politicians get into. Between them they can contribute to making the position on crime and disorder worse than it actually is.

But even if the majority of people do feel safe in their communities, if a significant minority does not, that should be a concern for us all. If those police surveys I mentioned earlier show over 80% of people satisfied with the help they have received in response to grievances they have personally raised in relation to crime and antisocial behaviour, then there will be nearly 20% who are not satisfied. That is a significant figure.

Equally, where the surveys show that 95% of people feel safe outside their homes during the day it also means that 5% do not. That is a lot of people. And we can assume that if you asked how many people feel unsafe at night, the figure will be higher.

So how do we start to turn this around? How do we both tackle crime more successfully and help people to feel reassured about their own safety along the way?

The Casey Review

In an attempt to find some answers to these questions, ministers commissioned a report from Louise Casey, the former head of the Government's Respect Task Force. Her job was to listen to what people are saying and to think about how to engage communities more successfully in the fight against crime. She got 15,000 responses to the surveys and consultations she carried out so it was a substantial piece of work. Her report was recently published (you can read its findings in full at: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/crime.aspx>).

The report contains a range of conclusions and proposals. They are not a statement of policy but the Prime Minister has said he accepts the broad thrust of what Louise Casey has said.

Time is short today so I just want to highlight a few key themes in the report.

Importance of feedback

The first is about the importance of feedback. When people report something to the Police, the Council or anyone else, or if they have personally been the victim of crime, they want to be kept informed about what happens afterwards.

The local police survey suggests that 67% of people who reported issues were happy with the way they were kept informed of progress. That is a clear majority, but it is not as good a satisfaction rating as the police scored in other areas.

We should remember that it is not only those people who report incidents themselves that think there is a problem with feedback. 90% of respondents to

the Casey review thought the public in general is not told enough about what happens to those who have committed crime.

It is not just that people feel they don't know what happened. All too often, if people don't know what has happened in response to a particular incident, the word goes around that this means that nothing has happened. It then isn't long before word of mouth takes it on a stage further. Suddenly, it is the given wisdom that if you do report something, nothing happens anyway so there is no point in reporting things.

And why does nothing happen? Pretty soon the same rumour mill will be suggesting that the problem boils down to the police not having the powers to deal effectively with crime and anti-social behaviour.

In reality, it is not like that. In many ways, the Police have more powers today than they have had for a long time.

But the public doesn't necessarily see that. That is why all agencies must redouble their efforts to ensure that feedback mechanisms are improved. If action is taken on an issue of community concern, the public needs to know what that action consisted of and what happened. If action has not been taken, people need to know why not.

The Casey Review puts forward a range of suggestions about how the police, local authorities and other agencies could improve their feedback to the public – and you can see some of these in her report.

Nationally, she also suggests that – for good or ill – because people often don't trust official statistics, we need to demonstrate greater transparency and independence in both the compilation and dissemination of statistics on crime and disorder. In particular she recommends the creation of a new public Commissioner who would be independent of Government. The Commissioner's job would not only be to scrutinize the statistics but also to act as a 'public champion' to the Government on issues related to crime and disorder.

Supporting victims and witnesses

The second key issue from the Casey Review which I want to mention today is the question of support for victims of crime and for witnesses: support that gives people the confidence to come forward.

We all know that one of the things that stops people from coming forward is the fear that if they report a crime, or stand up for other people in their area who are experiencing anti social behaviour, they themselves will suffer threats, intimidation or worse.

That is why the Casey Report recommends much clearer support both for victims and for witnesses.

Part of this includes extending the range of circumstances in which witnesses can retain anonymity when giving evidence in court. Recent court rulings which have cast doubt on previous court decisions that have relied on witness anonymity has meant that this issue has been all over the press in recent days. Widespread concern over the possible effects of those rulings is likely to lead to the speedy introduction of legislation over the coming weeks to regularise the situation.

The urgency is understandable. It could be some of the most serious cases which are jeopardised if the new rulings stand: cases ranging from murder to terrorism.

But allowing witnesses to give evidence anonymously in certain circumstances could also be an important weapon in bringing to justice those whose extreme anti social behaviour can blight the lives of others. I raised this matter with the Prime Minister during Question Time in the House of Commons only this week.

None of us should pretend that this is an easy issue. False and vexatious accusations do happen. Neighbour disputes are often littered with accusations and counter accusations that may only be made worse if they are protected from scrutiny by the cloak of anonymity. It is important for justice that in most cases, defendants are able to question their accusers.

But the fear of intimidation and reprisal can also prevent justice taking its course. We need to balance the rights of defendants against that and look at those circumstances in which witness anonymity can be offered without compromising justice. And where anonymity cannot be offered, we need to give witnesses the confidence that they will be effectively protected from reprisal.

Improving support for victims and witnesses also means that people have to be confident that if they do report things then something will actually happen and that they won't simply go around in circles.

I think this is really important when we are dealing with problems like persistent neighbour nuisance and anti social behaviour. If people report problems like these to the council and they are given diary sheets to record incidents for evidence, they need know that there is a point to this. I think all of us have come across cases in which people are asked to complete such diary sheets, only to find that if there is a temporary lull in their neighbour's anti-social behaviour, the case is closed. If the anti social behaviour starts up again they are asked to begin completing diary sheets again only to see another temporary lull, another case closure and then yet more diary sheets when the problems arise yet again. All too often it can seem like a merry-go-round with no result.

That is not good enough. The objective of all the agencies involved should be to achieve a sustainable outcome, not primarily to demonstrate that they have followed procedures without outcome.

It is for reasons like these that the Casey Report emphasises time and time again the importance of listening to what people say about their own experiences and why it is crucial that local community groups are given a far greater say in what needs to be done to make their areas safer. Again the Report has a series of suggestions about how this could happen.

Payback to the community

The Casey Review also emphasises the importance of the public seeing that offenders make some kind of payback to the community.

This is partly about promoting a greater understanding of what community service sentences actually mean. Sadly, the press headlines about this have tended to focus on one suggestion in the report – that people undertaking sentences in the community should wear luminous tabards.

That would certainly wreak havoc with politicians putting on luminous tabards for photo opportunities at litter picks!

But there is also a serious point here. Although it is a good idea to look at how community service orders can be more clearly linked with their payback to the community, we do need to be careful that this does not drift into damaging stigmatisation.

There are times when naming and shaming is a good thing to do. However we have to be sure that what we do is actually effective in turning people away from crime and – in respect of young people – we have to be sure that we do not simply end up perpetuating stereo types of young people.

Young people

There are a range of initiatives already in place nationally to tackle crime and disorder amongst young people. More have been brought in recently – or are on their way this year in relation to things like alcohol abuse and knife crime.

Many of these measures are about deterrence and punishment. Both of these things are a part of the solution to anti social behaviour and crime amongst young people. But they are only a part of the solution to tackling the disaffection amongst young people that can often be a breeding ground for crime and anti social behaviour.

That is why the Government is rightly putting a lot more resources into providing more facilities and creating more opportunities for young people

The Youth Opportunities Fund makes £4m available for young people in Birmingham over the next three years. There is also £2m for Birmingham in the Youth Capital Fund.

A further £8m has been allocated to Birmingham over the next three years under the Positive Activities for Young People programme – to concentrate on hotspots and times of the weeks when there are particular problems with anti social behaviour, such as on Friday evenings and Saturdays.

Under the new myplace scheme, grants of between £1m and £5m are available for youth facilities and activities. This is being administered by the Big Lottery Fund but it is Government money.

And millions of pounds more will be available nationwide for more youth facilities and activities once the Dormant Bank Accounts Bill has become law. Under this law proceeds from bank accounts that nobody now appears to own and which have lain dormant for years will be made available for community use – with a particular focus on facilities for young people. Again, this fund is likely to be administered through the Big Lottery Fund.

More money is always needed but a large amount of money is there to be used. The issue is how we put it to best use locally.

Northfield has already shown itself as a pioneer in Birmingham for the work we have done to involve young people. Our own youth forum – Northfield Involve – is an excellent initiative. Lewis Goodall, the first chair of Involve, spoke at last year's Northfield Constituency Convention.

We need to do more to support Involve. The challenge for Involve itself is to ensure that it is being as effective as it can be in reaching out to those young people who are most disaffected and therefore, sadly least likely to automatically get involved in something like Northfield Involve.

And we all need to recognise the importance of linking all of this with tackling those root issues which are vital to making our community safer. The importance of regenerating our area; the importance of promoting pride in the Northfield area; the importance of tackling worklessness.

A community approach

There are already a range of committees and networks, all of whom agree on the importance of tackling these things. We all agree about the importance of the agencies cooperating and working across boundaries. We agree on the

importance of focussing activities on neighbourhoods and that we should define neighbourhoods in a way that reflects community identities, not just administrative convenience.

There is a lot of good practice here to build on. But we still need to make sure that all the indicators, targets, review mechanisms and project plans we draw up to achieve these worthwhile objectives don't themselves end up complicating things so much that the only people who understand what is going on are the professionals involved.

If we are serious about developing a community approach, we must constantly relate back to the community for a reality check on what we are doing. That is as much a message for us politicians as it is for officers.

Events like today's Convention are valuable and useful. But we still need to think about whether there are sufficient resources made available for community involvement and whether, when resources are made available, they are structured and made available in a way that suits local people rather than the statutory agencies involved.

Are we building up an infrastructure of support for the local voluntary and community sector to enable them to have the voice that they need and that they deserve?

Are we helping them to get community groups or activities going in areas where these don't exist?

Are we confident that we are not imposing on local people models that suit us as institutions or politicians rather than them?

On Friday 11th July I am organising a half day conference for voluntary and community groups in this area to look at some of the practical support and resources that are available to them. Birmingham Voluntary Service Council and The Big Lottery Fund are organising the day with me and I am grateful to them. Hopefully the event will provide practical information for voluntary and community groups about how they can apply for funds, become more sustainable through their own activities and about where they can get help if they need it. But I also hope it will help promote networking amongst local community groups – to help them develop the mechanisms they need for a more effective voice in this area and to take up some of the issues that concern them.

I know I may sometimes seem like a cracked record about these things but I firmly believe they are relevant to the issues we are talking about today – tackling crime and promoting community safety.