

Forthspring 'Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities' Response

Introduction

Forthspring Inter Community Group is committed to working with local people in the Springfield/Woodvale area and promoting good relations within and between these communities. Forthspring is situated on the Falls/Shankill interface and has over 10 years experience of providing services on a cross community basis.

Our vision is of a diverse and peaceful community, where all people are free to live with dignity, hope, respect and understanding.

Forthspring has been successful in providing a much needed safe and welcoming environment where people from both communities can meet and find a different way from the violence and division of the past.

Forthspring brings together Protestants and Catholics to increase tolerance, understanding and trust by supporting people to talk about their religious, cultural and political similarities and differences within a safe space as well as engaging in social and educational activities on a shared basis.

Using a community development approach, a range of programmes are delivered that bring together people of all ages to interact across the wall and to break down barriers. These include youth provision, work with men and women, mothers and toddlers, after schools and senior citizens. Current projects include a Shared Neighbourhood project that engages local people in exploring the potential for social and economic development and developing improved relationships locally and an international dialogue project that promotes active citizenship and the value of diversity.

Forthspring welcomes the publication of the 'Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities' and the debate it has encouraged on developing an agreed, effective

community safety strategy. We strongly support the basic assumption of the document that reducing crime, fear of crime and anti-social behaviour requires the participation of local communities, the public, private and voluntary and community sectors, all working alongside PSNI and the justice agencies. Equally we support the overall goal of building safer, shared and confident communities.

Early Interventions and Anti-Social Behaviour

We strongly support the greater emphasis on early intervention as the key to reducing anti-social behaviour and crime. The attraction for young people engaging in anti-social behaviour is often a misplaced sense of excitement allied to high levels of boredom. Our experience working on an interface is that both these factors often give rise to aggressive and violent behaviour. Young people, particularly those in areas of high disadvantage, need credible alternatives to engaging in anti-social behaviour.

Although it may be difficult to arrive at and is not offered by the consultation document a tighter definition of 'anti-social behaviour' would be useful as a guide to people. In simple terms to say what it is and is not. Young people tell us that what they see as normal and acceptable behaviour such as meeting on street corners, in fact what is social behaviour,, is often described as anti-social behaviour and used to justify moving them on. Young people, particularly those in areas of high disadvantage, need credible alternatives to engaging in anti-social behaviour. Young people have a need to engage in risk taking, exciting behaviour and they need opportunities to do this in a safe, controlled manner. One option suggested to us is adventure play facilities situated in areas of social disadvantage where there are large vacant sites.

Young People

There is too often a tendency to associate young people with crime and anti-social behaviour. But the reality is different. For example young people, particularly young males, are more likely to be the victims of violent crime than the perpetrators. The misplaced association of young people and negative behaviour plays a large part in the perception of people that they are not safe. All agencies involved in the justice

system, working in conjunction with the media, should aim to present a positive view of young people and avoid negative stereotypes.

Support should be given to intergenerational projects and activities that break down the barriers that exist between young people and older people.

Young people expressed concern about the role of paramilitary organizations in dealing with perceived anti-social behaviour. Young people are often fearful of people associated with or perceived to be associated with paramilitary organizations. They are aware that adults in the community still engage members of paramilitary organizations to deal with young people. They reported that young people are often confused with individuals and organizations that offer support to young people in trouble on occasions being the same individuals and organizations that issue threats to young people. They stressed that when young people do behave badly the offer of mediation to redress wrong should be voluntary and offered without threat.

Young people pointed out that at particular times of the year young people feel less safe e.g. during the marching season or at times of high tension football matches and their parents fear for them. The focus on community safety should explicitly recognize the risks to safety associated with particular times of the year and particular locations.

Young people were asked 'do you feel safer now than your age group would have been 5 years ago'? They reported that young people were less safe – alcohol is cheaper and more accessible, there is wide range of drugs available including prescription drugs, there is more risk from engagement in sexual behaviour at a younger age with the prevalence of a large range of negative role models. In general they painted a worrying picture of young people facing a wide range of challenges to their health and well being with an absence of adequate resources to help them navigate the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood. This transition is often most difficult in areas of high social and economic disadvantage and, not surprisingly, these are the areas where young people often get into difficulty with the justice system.

Young people need readily accessible activities that provide a realistic alternative to negative risk taking activities such as interface violence. Interface areas typically have large vacant sites that attract young people and facilitate negative behaviour.

Alternative, safer opportunities for exciting, risk taking activities such as Belfast Activity Centre are located far from interface areas in areas of prosperity. Our view is facilities of a similar standard are urgently needed in interface areas along with other high standard facilities and staff that can engage young adults and give them positive life choices and opportunities.

Reducing Crime

The Shared Neighbourhood Survey Forthspring conducted with NIHE in September 2010 indicated that 45% of residents do not feel safe in their area after dark and 17% did not feel safe in their own homes after dark. In contrast 89% of respondents reported that they felt safe in the area during daylight hours and 88% felt safe in their own homes during the day. This would appear to confirm the observation in the document that whatever the statistical evidence in relation to falling rates of crime the public perception is that crime is increasing and there is a widespread fear of crime, particularly after dark. Our survey also revealed that relationships with PSNI could be improved. 38% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with policing in the area.

Our experience of PSNI is a positive one and we are confident the Police at local level are working effectively to build relationships with local communities. The distinction between neighbourhood policing and response policing is detrimental to building relationships with good work undertaken by neighbourhood policing often undermined by less sensitive response policing. There is room for considerable improvement in relationship building between PSNI and local communities and more effective relationships at this level, and a greater flow of information, would make a contribution to reductions both in levels of crime and in the fear of crime.

Forthspring in partnership with the NIHE Shared Neighbourhood Programme undertook a survey of 300 households locally in 2010 drawn from a sample of 1800 households. The survey indicated that 47% of respondents do not feel safe walking around the area after dark with 18% of respondents not feeling safe in their own homes after dark. Explanations about not feeling safe tended to focus on the presence or the behaviour of young people and on anti-social behaviour. There is an ongoing need to address the relationship between young people and older members of the community both in relation to behaviour and perception, plus offer more positive alternatives to young adults than the street. There is significant room for improvement in satisfaction levels with policing with 40% of respondents saying they are unsatisfied with how the area is policed.

One negative factor that contributes locally to high levels of fear of crime is the reporting of crime and anti-social behaviour by the local media. There is an unhelpful tendency to over dramatize high profile stories and play on popular fears of young people in particular. The Department of Justice could usefully encourage monitoring of the reporting of crime by local media and suggest guidelines to editors to report crime in a manner that does not unnecessarily increase community fears.

Shared Communities

We strongly agree that interface areas should be a focus of the strategy. We also agree with emphasis on safer through sharing rather than segregation. Forthspring acknowledges that the majority of interface residents support the maintenance of walls and barriers as a guarantor of safety. Therefore to be in a position to consider taking down walls a positive alternative, which includes re-assurances around safety, needs to be on offer. The approach needs to be a combination of regeneration, building better relationships and offering credible reassurances on safety.

Forthspring in partnership with the NIHE Shared Neighbourhood Programme undertook a survey of 1500 households locally in 2010. The survey illustrates the paradox of living on an interface. Residents want more sharing, less division but they are fearful that any movement to reduce divisions will result in a reduction in their safety. To move beyond the status quo residents need opportunities to build relationships across the interface, they need evidence of regeneration and they need confident, strong leadership committed to moving towards a more shared society. In spite of improving relationships between local residents and the Police Service

There should also be recognition that there are limitations to guarantees of safety through segregation. On the Springfield Road interface young people travel long distances to engage in violent behaviour including Ballymurphy, Glencairn, Divis, Poleglass, Shankill and, Crumlin Road. The debate on interfaces and walls and barriers should start from the position that the best guarantee of safety and confident communities in the long term is sharing, not segregation.

The safety of residents in interface communities can be improved without relying on physical barriers by building better relationships locally, building better relationships

between the police and the community, providing positive alternatives for young people and dealing with divisive issues such as parading in as inclusive a way as is possible. Resources need to be allocated on the basis of promoting sharing and shared facilities rather than maintaining and reinforcing segregation.