Response to Together.Stronger.Safer. Community safety in Northern Ireland: A consultation paper
Northern Ireland Office

January 2009

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. Community safety has an important impact on health, and can also improve health equity. As shown by for example the NI Crime Survey, crime and fear of crime tend to be more prevalent in more deprived areas, and the stress caused by this can serve to exacerbate other health risks and inequalities experienced by socially disadvantaged people.

Belfast Healthy Cities works to improve health and health equity in Belfast, through promoting new ways of working and facilitating intersectoral collaboration, and is a leading member of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network. A core theme for all WHO European Healthy Cities in Phase IV (2003-2008) has been healthy ageing, and in 2006 we published *Healthy Ageing:InterAction*, which included intersectoral action plans on seven themes identified as priorities by older people, including community safety. Under this action plan, we produced a briefing paper on older people and the health impacts of fear of crime, which was submitted as our response to the 2007 consultation on a community safety strategy for older people. A copy of the paper, formally published in 2008, is enclosed and we would like to draw attention to the recommendations made within this as key also to an overall community safety strategy.

As a general comment, we believe the consultation document makes several rather wide ranging claims, without presenting evidence to support this. Most importantly, what evaluation or other evidence is there to show that community safety initiatives have directly resulted in the reduction in crime? Does the NI Crime Survey provide data to show that anti social behaviour (ASB) either contributes to the perception that crime has increased, or that ASB increases fear of crime? To maintain credibility of the strategy, we would recommend that this evidence is presented in a final strategy, or that the claims are moderated in line with available evidence.

The themes and general comments

We believe the themes of creating safer neighbourhoods and building strong, confident communities are the correct ones. By considering the issues and needs of the entire community, it becomes possible to develop sustainable solutions that improve safety as well as health and wellbeing. We would stress that it is essential to focus on preventative, proactive measures rather than reactive measures (eg. aimed at redress for victims). Both the strategy and action plan

must be based on a broad understanding of the causes of offending and anti social behaviour, in order to efficiently tackle these.

We are less convinced about the titling of the theme 'Focus on families and young people'. While it is entirely appropriate to support young people at risk of offending and their families, the theme currently risks sending the message that only young people offend and therefore stigmatizes an entire population group, while ignoring adult offenders, the causes of their offending and their support needs. It may also imply that the strategy is less geared towards tackling other issues, such as fear of crime among older people. We recommend the theme should at least be retitled as 'Focus on those at risk of offending', which we believe better reflects the aims of this strategic strand.

Overall, we believe the strategy would benefit from clearly identified objectives for each theme. The draft provides some intended outcomes and targets, but these do not clearly link to all proposed areas of action. There is also a limited sense of strategic coherence across the proposed actions, while it is not clear whether these form the entire action plan or simply provide examples of action. The actions should also provide clear definitions and more detail, eg. what is meant and intended with 'visible environmental improvements'?

In principle, we fully agree with the proposal to give citizens and communities more involvement in improving community safety. Local communities are experts on their needs and also the solutions that will work best for them. Engaging in decision making and action is also a key mechanism for improving capacity and confidence, which in turn is vital for improving safety and will also improve health and wellbeing. However, it is crucial that communities are, firstly, met on an equitable basis and able to influence the work, and secondly, supported to build capacity and take action for themselves. Without a collaborative working partnership between communities and the relevant public and voluntary sector agencies, communities will have limited capacity to tackle issues alone.

Creating safer neighbourhoods

Belfast Healthy Cities view the neighbourhood level as key both to community safety and health and wellbeing. Key reasons for this include the opportunity for engaging with a defined local community and working intersectorally to tackle specific issues. The neighbourhood is also appropriate for tackling design and planning related issues, which can either enhance or weaken safety as well as health and wellbeing.

We particularly welcome the proposal to work with the Planning Service, housing providers, councils and the police to improve safety through the built environment. This is an excellent example of intersectoral working, and has significant potential to improve the design of our neighbourhoods, and also town

centres, by introducing an understanding of key issues at the planning stage. However, it is important that the focus of this work is broad, and considers for example the need to provide facilities for young people as a design issue that can help stop young people using the street as a meeting place, and minimize the risk for opportunity offending including vandalism and graffiti. It is also vital that community representatives are involved when specific developments are considered, as they are experts on needs and potential solutions for their own area.

We are not convinced that poor environments *per se* encourage crime or anti social behaviour, but would rather emphasise that both tend to occur and often coincide in more deprived areas. Environmental improvements on their own are unlikely to reduce deprivation, but if combined with economic and social regeneration measures, they can help develop a sense of optimism. Again we stress that it is essential to develop interventions in collaboration with the local community, so that they contribute to improved esteem and confidence within the locality. However, while environmental and physical security measures often are popular with the public, it is important to balance these with other social preventative measures, to achieve more sustainable solutions and avoid validating fear.

Issues such as graffiti and fly tipping or abandoned vehicles may best be tackled by improving facilities and public services. The issue of youth facilities has already been mentioned; alternatives may include allowing 'graffiti' in designated areas and engaging young people in public arts initiatives, the latter of which can also help them feel valued and encourage them to take pride in their area (which also improves especially mental health and wellbeing). Improved access to waste disposal and recycling facilities can help tackle waste related issues; an example might be a well advertised 'one stop' phone number for bulky goods collections that could also serve for reporting abandoned vehicles.

Social marketing campaigns can support these by encouraging people to change their behaviour. It is also important to work with all public sector agencies to improve understanding of the potential safety impacts of their activities. A key stakeholder currently missing is the education sector, whose decisions for example in relation to funding of youth work and facilities has major consequences relevant to community safety.

In terms of improving safety in town centres at night, we believe the range of work currently supported is appropriate. Community safety partnerships could also have a role in supporting non alcohol focused nighttime uses of town centres, and supporting work on responsible use of alcohol.

Focus on families and young people

We would reiterate our concern regarding the stigmatizing title. We also believe the language elsewhere in this section is in places inappropriate (eg. 'most troublesome families', p.30), and would like to see this amended in the final strategy.

Offending is typically linked to social disadvantage and exclusion, in particular low educational achievement and lack of job opportunities. Therefore, quality education for all should be the foundation of strategy and action to prevent offending, while providing continued or second chance access to education and employment support should be a cornerstone of strategy to prevent reoffending and rehabilitate offenders. The role of CSU might be to engage the education sector, and potentially support initiatives aimed at engaging students in their local community, or re-engaging those at risk of disaffection. Concrete initiatives might include intergenerational projects, the aforementioned public arts initiatives, or a programme of visits by former offenders, who can highlight the full consequences of offending. Continued support for restorative justice projects, where possible rolled out to cover low level offenses committed by people of all ages, should be a complementary activity forming the key to challenging people in changing their behaviour.

The proposal to support leisure opportunities is also fully in line with this approach of personal life control, which should apply to people of all ages. Indeed, we believe such activities have intrinsic value as they can help people to develop skills and confidence, and should be prioritised especially in a climate of tight resources. This will not only reduce the risk of offending, but will also support health and wellbeing and can offer new life opportunities, outside or in addition to academic achievement. These benefits should be recognized in their own right, rather than demeaned as 'diversionary activity'. Generally, the aim of all initiatives should be to help people of all ages and backgrounds participate in society as valued members. Treating any particular group as a potential problem is likely to achieve the opposite, and therefore counteract the purpose of a community safety strategy.

Support for and collaboration with substance dependence services are important elements of the approach described above. Similarly, in some cases family support packages may be appropriate to tackle multiple problems. However, the aim should be to act in collaboration with the family, in line with the inclusive approach above. Packages of a punitive nature such as parenting support orders may be less effective if parents do not agree with the need to change, and would require sanctions in case of non compliance to ensure impact.

Belfast Healthy Cities would stress that support to families, eg. referrals to parenting courses, employability support, substance dependence treatment etc. should be offered as early as possible; ideally before problems get out of hand and a young person commits an offense. Again, the education sector has an important role in identifying young people at risk, and this further highlights why it

is vital to engage the sector in preventative work. CSU and CSPs could take a coordinating role in developing support systems, but for practical and confidentiality reasons the health and social services sector would be best placed to lead this.

Building strong, confident communities

While we believe the theme 'Building strong, confident communities', and also the desired outcome, are appropriate, we are less convinced that the proposed sub themes and actions cover the entire spectrum required to achieve safe, healthy and sustainable communities.

The element we believe should take priority and currently goes completely without mention is support for community development work, including social integration, cross community relations, anti racism initiatives and tackling isolation, which is a major factor in fear of crime. Work aimed at building community capacity is also missing, except for schemes of a Watch type nature which have a very specific function. We believe CSPs should have a key role in all of these fields, which are key to building a diverse but cohesive and equal society, that in turn is a prerequisite for low levels of crime. We would also stress that local communities should be able to influence CSPs. This could take the form of regular meetings with community fora or invitations to groups to make presentations at CSP meetings.

We note there is a proposal to establish neighbourhood consultative forums as part of PSNI Neighbourhood Policing recommendations, and would suggest that CSU encourage the use of existing community fora as a basis for this. This would enable the work to build on and feed into existing partnerships and initiatives, benefit from trust and experience established in the community, and also represent most efficient use of all partners' time. In addition, it would show confidence in the capacity of communities, which would help build positive relationships and boost overall community confidence.

While we are supportive of community sentences in principle, we recommend extreme caution in relation to community payback, in order to avoid stigmatizing the offender in a way that undermines the reparative and rehabilitative intention. At minimum, any public markers such as the high visibility vests recently introduced in England and Wales should be avoided. The best way for the local community to input might be to identify work required in the area in general terms.

In terms of raising awareness, emphasis should be on informing citizens and communities of all ongoing initiatives and available services. Regular newsletters

by CSPs would help community organizations stay informed of work undertaken; these could be integrated with other publications such as Belfast City Council's City Matters magazine. CSU itself should consider developing a similar newsletter, which would provide more equitable and direct access to information than the website alone. This is particularly important for example for older people, who remain least likely to use the Internet and who have frequently called for information of ongoing work as a key form of tackling fear of crime.

Supporting the particularly vulnerable

Belfast Healthy Cities agrees that particular consideration should be given to the most vulnerable population groups. However, we are very disappointed that the consultation document makes reference to older people only in this context. This implies an ageist attitude, with a limited understanding of older people and their contribution to society. We are also concerned that virtually no mention is made of the delivery of a community safety strategy for older people, promised in 2003 and consulted on in 2007.

In support of calls made by the age sector, we would urge CSU to provide further details of plans for the safety of older people as soon as possible. Indeed, we believe these should constitute a separate but integrated chapter of the overall strategy, to ensure that the needs of older people are mainstreamed and progress easily monitored.