

editorial

community engagement

Rob Allen puts this issue on community engagement in perspective.

In the second reading debate in 1998, Jack Straw described new Labour's flagship *Crime and Disorder Bill* as "the triumph of community politics over detached metropolitan elites", suggesting that the agenda for dealing with crime should henceforth be rooted in the 'everyday concerns of ordinary voters' rather than the liberal theories and self-serving practices of professionals and policymakers.

The Act's introduction of local crime and disorder reduction partnerships, youth

latest legislative effort would give local people the power to trigger action from police and local authorities via a community call to action. A minister has been despatched to the USA to find out about community notification – the system by which information about the whereabouts of sex offenders is made available to the public.

For the Prime Minister, there is still much further to go. He thinks the criminal justice system is the public service most out of touch with the concerns of voters and

have not received sufficient public attention or generated proper debate. In his interview he argues that in London the police now have a genuine neighbourhood focus and that the proposed community call to action will be rarely used because the police are already on top of community concerns. Faulkner *et al* take up his plea for a debate about what the police are for, arguing that specific consideration be given to whether change is most needed in how the police are organised and managed, the powers they have or how they relate to the communities they serve.

Arguably the level of resources available to the police make a more local focus more achievable than for other hard-pressed agencies. In their piece on work with communities to tackle low level disorder, Bacon and James suggest the police are more active partners in neighbourhood management

which as Home Secretary he was instrumental in setting up, after a visit to the Red Hook Centre in New York. He argues that the criminal justice system needs to provide a better outcome for the community; for him "non-reoffending is the judge and jury of our system". Hard though it is for Home Office ministers to accept, the criminal justice system plays only a marginal role in reducing offending. And the justice system has other objectives too – enshrined in the *Criminal Justice Act* Blunkett himself took through Parliament.

As far as one of these objectives, reparation, is concerned, the Liverpool court has a panel of community members who help to identify priorities for unpaid work to be done by offenders subject to community orders. A more formal pilot to do this, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation as a follow-up

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offending teams, and powers to curb anti-social behaviour certainly sought to engage the participation of a wider range of organisations and interests in tackling crime than hitherto. In the intervening eight years, the appeal to community has loomed large in the criminal justice lexicon. Many routine policing tasks are now undertaken by community support officers, offenders are sentenced to community orders, community justice centres are seen to point the way to 'doing law differently', and there is talk once more of offenders serving their sentences in community prisons. The 'Together We Can' campaign and 'Respect' agenda have tried to give a voice to community concerns across a range of policy areas including criminality, and the

what is needed, is a "complete change of mindset, an avowed, articulated determination to make protection of the law-abiding public the priority and to measure that not by the theory of the textbook but by the reality of the street and community in which real people live real lives".

This edition of CJM examines the rhetoric and reality of community engagement across the work of different criminal justice agencies, exploring the common themes and raising a range of questions about both principles and practice.

Community policing has a long and rich tradition in England and Wales, but according to Metropolitan Police Chief Sir Ian Blair, recent changes to the role of the police and wider police family

initiatives than agencies that deliver the "support side of the anti-social behaviour equation, including social services and Yots".

Lack of resources has not stopped other agencies trying to become in Ben Rogers' words "more outward looking, locally visible services, responsive to local concerns." Rohan Collier shows how the Race and Equality Unit in the CPS has improved prosecutors' understanding about the context and dynamics of racial crime and domestic violence.

Getting to grips with both the roots and impact of crime in local communities is one of the aims of community justice centres, which are to be extended to 10 further areas following the latest criminal justice review. David Blunkett describes the Liverpool centre

to the Rethinking Crime and Punishment Initiative, is described by Debbie Clarke. Early work in the Thames Valley suggests considerable potential for greater community involvement in alternatives to prison.

As for prisons themselves, Andrew Coyle notes the resurgence of interest in community prisons on the part of the last Home Secretary at least. Coyle argues that a network of smaller local prisons underpinned by integrated links to local services would oblige us to re-examine the link between prisoner and the community. Eric Cadora shows how this link is being examined in (of all places) the USA where the sheer numbers of offenders re-entering the most fragile

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communities after a spell in prison has forced policy makers to rethink their approach to resettlement. 'Justice reinvestment' describes local initiatives to transfer some of the resources tied up in imprisonment to fund more socially constructive projects in deprived neighbourhoods. While the scale of incarceration in the UK has not reached American proportions, the case for a similarly local approach to the governance of criminal justice applies with some force in England and Wales. But despite the rhetoric about increasing community involvement in courts, probation and prisons, the regional basis of the NOMS arrangements combined with a changing cast of service providers may weaken rather than strengthen local links.

Three main themes arise from the analyses of relations between criminal justice organisations and the communities on whose behalf they work. First, there is the question of who counts as the community. For Dolan Cummings community involvement is rarely as democratic as it sounds, often amounting to "a means of surveillance, a resource for essentially traditional state agencies". Farrant points out that for many young men, the communities they return to are crime ridden. One told her "everyone's bang at it, even the old people". This illustrates Roberts' reminder about the contested nature of communities and the selective understandings of crime which they reflect. In similar vein, Farrow and Prior underline the lack of community cohesion in the poorest neighbourhoods, a point echoed by Bolton's assessment of Neighbourhood Watch which her research has found can "put people off". Coleman *et al* argue that the involvement of businesses in crime and disorder partnerships may have insulated them from attention they should get from criminal justice agencies, when they themselves break the law.

The second theme concerns the most effective mechanisms for engaging with communities. Sir Ian Blair is comfortable that the liaison arrangements for police and community reflect the need for structures at different levels, a point contested by Goodman *et al* who discuss the difficulties of partnership working for victims of crime at individual, project, and strategic level. At the individual level, Devlin and O' Mahoney describe the innovative system of restorative youth conferencing in Northern Ireland which has succeeded in securing victim participation in more than two-thirds of cases. Pycroft asks how best offenders themselves should be involved in the work of the probation service.

Whatever mechanisms are established, there is a need to ensure community views are genuinely represented. Sir Ian Blair's assertion that minority communities trust the police may strike some as complacent. Certainly for Lee Jasper the challenges for community engagement must be seen against a deeply disturbing situation where experiences of offending, victimisation and experience of the criminal justice service vary considerably among ethnic groups. Farrow and Prior argue that in the poorest areas, crime is not necessarily the most appropriate agenda through which deep-seated social and economic problems should be attacked. Bacon and James report that even on hard pressed estates there is an interest among residents in a balanced approach, not simply enforcement but the "longer term cure offered by support". Ensuring that there are proper links with neighbourhood and civil renewal efforts seems essential.

Finally, there is the question of how far community

engagement should go. For Andrew Coyle, if spending on prisons were identified locally, there might be closer scrutiny of whether the local taxpayer was getting value for money. In a similar localist vein, Mick Ryan reckons that those arguing for progressive reform need to engage with grassroots groups rather than Whitehall. He notes in passing the News of the World campaign for a 'Sarah's Law', which since he wrote appears to have found favour with the Home Secretary. Many who support more community involvement in criminal justice are deeply uncomfortable about the possible consequences of such a law. And what are we to make of community justice centres which by strengthening the links between the courts and the local community will increase confidence so that in the words of the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA) "the community will feel empowered to take more action to tackle offending behaviour and reduce crime"? According to the DCA success will be measured in terms of outcomes but there is little data about the impact of the existing centres. How far have they listened to and acted upon community concerns? Have they broken cycles of re-offending? Have they made community penalties more visible? We know little as yet about the impact, if any, on remand and sentencing decisions. While there is justifiable enthusiasm for the idea, sooner or later a more hard headed assessment of the costs and benefits will need to be undertaken.

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