Inter-generational Approaches to Tackling Youth Disorder

Michelle Whitworth looks at Lifelink's community-based work bridging the gap between young and old.

Social measures need to go hand in hand with physical measures to combat fear of crime. For older people, 'target hardening' measures, like better locks and bolts, can increase feelings of safety but, paradoxically, may also exaggerate their likelihood of victimisation thus limiting their freedom and amplifying their fear. (Pain 1995). This can set up a vicious circle in which physical and social isolation cause loss of trust, leading to further withdrawal and so on; whereas those who are most active and involved in their communities are least afraid. Moreover, local and national surveys indicate a climate of fear surrounding 'incivilities' and youth disorder — young people gathering on the street are in themselves intimidating to many. Anderson(1998) recommends: "In the absence of contact between these groups, older people's anxieties about using the same public space can multiply. More inter-generational work should be undertaken to help break down the barriers between younger and older people."

Age Concern North Tyneside established LifeLink for this very purpose: to reduce fear of crime in older people through inter-generational dialogue. Several LifeLink projects over its six years of SRB funding have been explicitly related to fear of crime, for example:

- Joint activities between young offenders and older people in day-care, residential homes and community centres.
- Focus groups with older and younger people to explore mutual perceptions of each other and fear of crime.
- Conferences encouraging teenagers and people over 50 to explore, in small workshops, such issues as fear of young people on the street, worries about personal safety, and the influence of the media on ageism and fear of crime.

A wide variety of projects, on the other hand, have been of a more general nature, aimed at promoting understanding between different age groups in the community, e.g.:

- Arts projects, resulting in several colourful mosaics, wallhangings, and murals for community and day centres, and two redesigned gardens for sheltered housing.
- Reminiscence, history and storytelling projects, involving primary and high schools, sheltered housing, local history groups and other community groups.
- Partnerships with providers of Saturday and after school clubs in order to engage older people as helpers.

The police have become increasingly interested in the potential of multi-agency partnerships to address problems in the community. This year, the Wallsend police invited LifeLink into two partnership schemes, one of which, described below, draws on a 'problem-solving' model originated in the US.

A group of year 10 students decided to focus on issues related to older people in their personal and social development lessons, following a drama presentation on elder abuse at their community college. The police community beat manager and youth issues officer put them in touch with sheltered housing close to the school because of the numerous complaints from tenants there about anti-social behaviour, much of it related to under-age drinking around the shops opposite them. They also invited two voluntary agencies to add their expertise – LifeLink and E2000, an organisation which aims to develop global participation and social inclusion amongst young people.

The initiative took place over a number of weeks, including the summer holidays, and, with support from the different agencies, incorporated a variety of interventions from the young people, such as:

- Meetings with the tenants to explore their problems with vandalism, graffiti, and intimidation by drunken teenagers.
- On-line discussions with teenagers in Estonia and Italy about how youth disorder is manifested and handled abroad.
- Letters to the council requesting additional litter bins and to the community centre about youth facilities.
- Design of a poster for distribution to shopkeepers and other locals to highlight the effects of underage drinking and the penalties for abetting it. (The young people applied to the keyfund to pay for poster production).
- Meetings between the older and younger people to plan an outing.
- Joint fund-raising through a coffee morning at the court and a successful application to the Community Foundation.
- Positive press coverage.

The coach trip was the culmination of all this hard work and was an unqualified success. Many of the 28 tenants who went along (including one 90 year old who never goes out) could not have gone without the young people to lend an arm or push a wheelchair. Best of all was the camaraderie that developed between the age groups and the way some of the more shy pupils blossomed in these circumstances. Inter-generational contact is increasingly being valued as an aid to community cohesion, and the professionals involved: teachers, housing wardens, community workers and the police themselves – have no doubts about the outcomes in terms of individual personal benefits.

age groups but in reducing youth disorder and anti-social behaviour. One of the key recommendations of the Unity in Community partnership was that inter-generational working should underpin all work in the locality. These elements enhance success:
- Key statutory players working together (e.g. education, health, police) with voluntary agencies experienced in dealing with older and younger people.
- Structures enabling these partnerships from the top (In Wallsend, the agencies are part of the extended schools network, in NE Lincolnshire, they were backed by the community safety partnership and staff were seconded from the

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Evaluations conducted by LifeLink repeatedly show positive attitude change in project participants. "I never realised how much what I do affects older people and will take that into account in future" (a young person), or " I was apprehensive beforehand about meeting them because I automatically think of young people as troublemakers" (an older person), are typical comments. In North Shields, there has been a striking improvement in the behaviour and confidence of young people at risk of exclusion as a result of placements in older people's lunch clubs.

Unfortunately, 'increased confidence' and 'empowerment through shared experience' often cut little ice with funders who require impact measures, in terms of truancy or crime statistics, for example. In fact, the problem-solving approach does seem able to yield hard data. An 18 month multi-agency partnership in NE Lincolnshire called Unity in Community ran a series of interventions, including meetings and drama sessions with sheltered housing tenants and high school pupils.

Afterwards, complaints to the police about 'youth disorder' (much of which had been young people gathering rather than offending) were significantly reduced, even though the pupils engaged were not necessarily the same young people – apparently, the tenants had simply become more tolerant of young people in general.

In respect of the Wallsend problem-solving initiative, the statistics tell an even more remarkable story. Over a six-week summer holiday period, the number of reprimands issued by the police fell by 75%. There were undoubtedly other factors: the summer schemes centred on the community college (in which the police also participated) attracted and diverted many of the young people normally at risk. Nevertheless, education professionals locally have commended the problem-solving initiative, knowing that the pupils involved knew a significant number of the under-age drinkers.

In conclusion, inter-generational projects can assist not only in easing conflict and tension between

police and health promotion).
- Sufficient staffing and financial resources to facilitate and sustain the work.
- Last but not least, a willingness to put younger and older people centre stage in determining solutions to community problems.

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Michelle Whitworth co-ordinates LifeLink, Age Concern North Tyneside's inter-generational project. She has a background in community development and drug rehabilitation.

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