

The Newlove Report: a new opportunity or an obligation for communities to confront crime?

Tom Considine argues that the report could cause more problems than it solves

Baroness Newlove's report *Our vision for Safe and Active Communities*, was published on 29 March 2011, at the onset of an austerity drive in spending across the public sector, including the criminal justice system. The police are facing a cut of up to 20 per cent in their finances over the next five years, which has resulted in an ongoing debate about their ability to maintain law and order (Casciani, 2011).

Baroness Newlove's report offers a possible solution to the concerns indicated by this debate. The report advocates that communities and individuals should be encouraged in and rewarded for playing a more central role in addressing crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB). Explicitly citing the term 'Big Society', the report argues for a change in the public mindset: rather than looking to other authorities to address local crime problems, people should do it themselves. In effect the report implicitly suggests that the gaps left by a reduction in police resources can be plugged by the public.

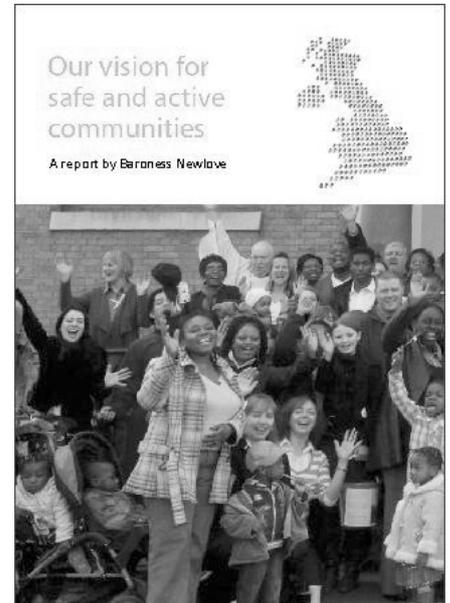
'Responsibilisation'

In one sense this proposal is consistent with the 'responsibilisation' agenda that has been a characteristic feature of criminal justice practice for almost 30 years (O'Malley, 1992). Within a neo-liberal political framework, individualised responses to crime

have increasingly been promoted. One possible aspect of this is the potential legitimisation of vigilantism (Considine, 2011). However, in seeking to relocate the responsibility of tackling crime further onto individuals and communities, the Newlove Report, if implemented, could open up the possibility of blaming communities for their own victimisation. Those who are witnesses to persistent acts of anti-social behaviour and criminal acts in their local vicinity but do not take direct action could be held partly accountable for such behaviour. In effect, this could extend the notion of victim blaming to a new concept: witness blaming.

Shortly after she was made a Baroness, Helen Newlove was appointed as the government's Champion for Active Safer Communities and within six months had produced her findings. It is noted in the introduction that Baroness Newlove's interest in community safety springs from personal experience: in 2007 her husband, Garry Newlove, was fatally attacked near the family home by a group of youths who had been 'causing trouble' in the neighbourhood on a persistent basis. It is noted that little was done by the authorities or the community prior to the attack; if something had been

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done, her husband's death may have been averted.

Key recommendations

In light of these experiences Baroness Newlove is, understandably, keen that this report does not simply 'gather dust' but becomes the basis for a policy change and practical action. The report draws upon seven examples of local community activities in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour. From this, several key recommendations are made as to how individuals and local groups can be supported and encouraged to tackle local

problems. These are:

- Community Reward, which involves providing funding for initiatives that actually lead to a conviction.
- 'Bling Back', a scheme which, drawing upon the argot of drug dealers, proposes that gains made through the illicit drug trade be redirected to the community following conviction.
- Further development of the use of crime maps so that the public can use them to report crime and ASB and agencies can publish details of what actions they take.

- Provision of a single point of contact for the public through the rollout of '101' as a dedicated number to report ASB.
- Reductions in council tax or vouchers for those actively involved in crime reduction schemes.
- Police and Crime Commissioners should have the power to devote at least 1 per cent of the police budget to grassroots community projects.
- Local communities should be given powers to set their own speed limits.

It is worth noting that four of the seven proposals above involve financial rewards. As well as promoting cash incentives, they could prove to be socially divisive. Just as it has been argued that widening social inequality is reflected in the way different communities can protect themselves from crime (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), so the suggestions above may find a more responsive audience from those with the resources and capacity to implement them. In other words, those communities that have a greater need to protect themselves may struggle, without additional finances, to obtain the results that could generate further cash.

It is argued, moreover, that those communities who were to act upon these new opportunities would have the chance to strengthen community ties, in a similar vein to the much fabled community spirit of the Second World War. Invoking stronger social ties is a compelling aspiration, but likening it to a war time social spirit may have unintended consequences. It not only reinforces the notion of addressing crime as a military operation, but also presents the criminal as the foe to be defeated. It continues a prevalent view of a separate 'criminal type' against whom we are at war.

Opportunity or responsibility?

Overall the aim of the report is to create a 'generation shift' in which

communities do not see crime as 'someone else's problem', but as something that is owned and acted upon by the community itself. We are exhorted to 'stop complaining about crime and how much agencies do, and do something about it [ourselves]' (Newlove, 2011). For those who are 'willing and able to intervene to challenge behaviour' what is required is that they should do so 'confident they will be supported by their neighbours, police, landlords, local council, ward councillors and their local MP'. So, not only should we be asking less of our local authorities – which is useful in the face of financial cuts – but, as gaps open up in service provision, they can be filled by local volunteers, with official support.

Implicit tensions

For those who are not 'willing and able' to participate, it is acknowledged that 'we need to recognise that there is a proportion who are just not interested in getting involved, and that is their choice', but then the report goes on to say that 'being actively involved in your community and helping to keep it safe needs to become the norm rather than the exception' (ibid.). Here lies one of the unacknowledged but implicit tensions in the report. Although it recognises that not everyone will want to get involved, it suggests that this should be a minority response. It does not explore or consider the reasons why some would wish to exercise their option not to get involved. The implication here is that those who witness acts of ASB and crime in their area, but do not directly respond, could be open to blame for their own plight. There could be very good reasons why people might be wary of taking up this offer to challenge crime. They could be mindful of the consequences should they intervene, such as the tragedy which befell Garry Newlove. Communities may lack a cohesive identity and some groups may feel less empowered to get involved.

As the reality of the spending cuts become increasingly apparent and there are growing concerns about the resources to maintain law and order, the Newlove Report offers a potential solution, namely to relocate responsibility within the communities themselves. Such a move could plug potential gaps in the police and other agencies who offer protection. It could, moreover, offer a transformative approach to crime control in that the public do not just work *with* the police but *instead* of them. As such, the blame, as well as the responsibility, can be relocated to individuals and communities. Such an approach may further 'downplay the role of other social factors and conditions in the creation of disorder, which may be more influenced by social policy – such as neighbourhood renewal or urban regeneration – than by criminal justice actions' (Hope, 2009). Those groups least able to take up the proposed opportunities may well be the hardest hit in more ways than one. ■

Tom Considine is Senior Lecturer/Admissions Tutor, Division of Criminology, Politics and Sociology, University of Huddersfield

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