



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR JUSTICE

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Community Safety Strategy

20 October 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR JUSTICE

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Seán Lynch
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr Alban Maginness
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr Mark Goodfellow) Department of Justice
Mr Eamon Jones)
Mr Steven McCourt)
Mr Declan McGeown)

The Chairperson:

We are joined by Declan McGeown, head of the community safety unit at the Department of Justice (DOJ); Steven McCourt, head of the operations, protection and organised crime division; Mark Goodfellow, head of the partnership development branch, community safety unit; and Eamon Jones, acting head of strategy, implementation and research branch, community safety unit. I welcome you all to the meeting. The session will be recorded by Hansard. Declan, I invite you to kick off, after which members will have some questions.

Mr Declan McGeown (Department of Justice):

We welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee on the responses to ‘Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities: A Consultation on a New Community Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland’. Members will recall that I touched on the emerging issues at our

introductory meeting in June this year. I intend to use today to update members on progress since then and to set out the proposed next steps.

The briefing paper provided to Committee members sets the context of the consultation and gives an overview of the extensive engagement and consultation process that the Department undertook earlier this year. It might be useful at this point to provide some facts and figures on that engagement. We had 12 public events over six weeks across Northern Ireland, with the Justice Minister attending five. We had 300 members of the public in attendance. We had 47 meetings with community and voluntary groups, and we received 125 written responses to the consultation paper. The outcome of the engagement was to hear, at first hand, the views of local communities and voluntary groups that work at grass-roots level.

I will turn to the key issues arising from the consultation. The responses highlighted a range of common themes and key issues in response to developing safer, shared and confident communities. Unsurprisingly, antisocial behaviour was a recurrent theme at all public events and was identified as the number one priority by attendees. The link between alcohol and drug abuse and crime and antisocial behaviour was also a common theme. The graduated approach to addressing antisocial behaviour was welcomed by respondents, with suggestions for improving on how it is delivered. Mixed views were expressed on anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) and the need for additional legislative powers. It is also important to highlight that many consultees challenged the perception that all young people are responsible for antisocial behaviour. There was widespread support for a greater focus on early intervention as a strategic priority in addressing community safety through the forging of links with existing partnerships, including the children and young people's strategic partnership.

Consultees also highlighted the need to continue efforts to address domestic and sexual violence, reflecting the crucial role of the voluntary sector in supporting victims and raising awareness. There was a call for a greater recognition of the needs of all victims, including male and same-sex victims.

The message on supporting shared communities was that the local community must lead and be actively engaged in efforts to promote safety at interfaces and in areas of contested space. That reflected the tone of the consultation, which emphasised a supporting role for Departments to enable and support communities to move forward at their own pace. Efforts to address hate crime were also welcomed, with the need for greater education and awareness-raising, and suggestions were made around increasing confidence to improve reporting rates.

More generally, respondents highlighted the need to develop and maintain confidence in the police, justice agencies and all those involved in promoting community safety. The fear of crime was highlighted as an important issue for older people, with social isolation being seen as a major factor. The need to provide assurance was also highlighted, while young people raised concerns about crime and victimisation, with the issue of intergenerational approaches again being raised. The central role of the community and voluntary sectors in creating safer, shared and confident communities was evident from the consultation process. The new opportunities presented through the establishment of policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) and the need to develop their skills set to deliver evidence-led outcomes were also highlighted.

I will turn to the next steps. Overall, there was broad support for the direction of travel suggested in the consultation, with agreement on the need to focus on prevention and early intervention, to work in partnership and to support local communities to provide local solutions. The key priorities that emerged from the consultation were the need to address antisocial behaviour, alcohol and drug misuse; to support early interventions to prevent offending; and to support shared communities.

Since the consultation period ended, officials have been working, through interdepartmental groups, to develop final outcomes for the strategy that build on what we heard during the consultation. We have specifically involved Departments and agencies in formulating the outcomes because we firmly believe that, to deal with the issues properly, we need to develop a community safety strategy that has the support and ownership of all those who are best placed to deliver it. In essence, we want it to be government's community safety strategy, not just the Department of Justice's. We firmly believe that addressing community safety issues requires a true partnership approach.

We are developing short-, medium- and long-term outcomes using the logic model approach, which will include relevant indicators and measures of success. One of the messages from the consultation, however, was that we should not focus solely on quantitative statistics around crime and antisocial behaviour; we need to consider issues of confidence and quality of life, too.

The strategy will set the direction for addressing community safety over the next five years. The key pillars will be, first, a continuing focus on what works to address priority issues such as antisocial behaviour and to build on the partnership approach that has led to a

reduction in antisocial behaviour over recent years; secondly, a stronger focus on early intervention and prevention that recognises the need to address long-term issues while ensuring that, in the short term, we continue to support communities; thirdly, contributing to and supporting Executive-wide efforts to build shared communities through supporting communities to address issues around interfaces, contested space and hate crime; and, fourthly, a greater focus on partnership working at all levels, including at the Executive table, across Departments and locally through the new PCSPs.

Today's briefing provides a welcome opportunity to listen to the views of the Committee on the approach that we have taken and the issues raised during the consultation as we develop proposals for the final strategy. Our focus at this time is on developing outcomes that have departmental, agency and community buy-in. We intend to bring clear targets to the Committee in the weeks ahead as we work towards finalising the draft strategy. We are happy to take any questions that members may have.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much, Declan. I have a couple of very quick questions. There is quite a divergent response to ASBOs: it is pretty much 50:50 between those who think they work and those who think they do not. What is the main reason for people thinking that they do not work? Is it because of the stigma associated with them, or is it because they are not enforced properly? What is the rationale?

Mr McGeown:

I invite Eamon to respond after me, but the general sense that I got was that some thought that ASBOs were considered a badge of honour. Others thought that they demonised people, and some just felt that they were not effectively administered in some areas. It was a bit of a mixed bag.

Mr Eamon Jones (Department of Justice):

On one side, there were those who thought that ASBOs did not go far enough and that the application of ASBOs by the judiciary was inconsistent. On the other side, the likes of children's groups pointed to the stigmatisation of children and young people and said that ASBOs, which have been controversial since their introduction, did not fit in with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child because they were not in the best interests of the child. A Criminal Justice Inspection (CJI) review in 2008 stated that the approach to ASBOs in Northern Ireland has been sensible and that we have not seen the same type of issues that there have been in England and Wales. CJI said that, so far, there has been a proportionate

use of ASBOs here.

The Chairperson:

You talk about trying to develop the strategy across a range of Departments and about other people having a role to play in combating antisocial behaviour. Will your strategy link in with the likes of the Planning Service so that, when areas are being developed, you can, at the design stage, remove areas in which people can congregate and hide behind walls to cause the types of problems that arise?

Mr McGeown:

Once we got a sense of the key themes that were emerging, we convened discussions and invited all Departments to take part. They sent representatives to those discussions. We said that we will develop what we think are the long-term outcomes and then ask them to identify actions that they can take to contribute to a reduction in the incidence of antisocial behaviour and so on.

Mr Jones:

The consultation specified issues of designing out crime. We recognise that that has a role to play in addressing crime and antisocial behaviour. The police, through their architectural liaison officers, have been very proactive to date in working with the Planning Service and others to ensure that newbuilds and new social housing areas take account of community safety issues. So, the built environment, the physical environment and addressing signal crimes such as breaking windows will feature in the wider environmental issues around antisocial behaviour.

The Chairperson:

Are you confident that you will get buy-in from all the different Departments?

Mr McGeown:

I have been very impressed by Departments' willingness to participate. We called a meeting at short notice before the summer, and we had a full turnout from Departments and other agencies. We then sent them a piece of work to do over the summer to help populate the template that we circulated. We have since called them back and had discussions, during which we said, "Have another look at this, and, if we need you, we will call you back again for another meeting." So, they have participated fully in the spirit of working together.

Mr Dickson:

I congratulate you on that piece of work. Northern Ireland will not go anywhere unless we build safer, shared and confident communities. To that end, I wholly commend this task.

I will concentrate on shared communities and follow on from the comments that you made to the Chair about working with other Departments. There needs to be full and complete buy-in from everybody, whether that involves the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) working on alcohol and drug education or the Department of Education (DE) working with young people. Whichever Department is involved, they all have a contribution to make for the greater good of the community. That is the outcome that we are trying to achieve. That buy-in is important, and I was absolutely delighted to hear what you said about the positive reaction from Departments.

Some of the answers about shared communities have certainly been very good. It is quite clear that people really want to move this forward. We have seen small but significant moves in north Belfast, with the removal of some gates and walls. In the summary of responses to the consultation, respondents said that:

“any solutions to remove physical barriers must be led by local communities”.

Again, that takes us back to the need for buy-in from every Department. First, how can you ensure that the new PCSPs will support communities that want to do that? Also, how will they help and direct communities that need to do that work but that also need to build the confidence to do so? Secondly, I note the comment on the development of a flags protocol in the section of the report that deals with shared communities. It is vital that we ensure that space is not only shared but neutral.

Mr McGeown:

Before I pass that over to Stephen, I will say that, having chaired the two discussions on shared communities, the sense that I got is that there is a willingness around the table to focus not just on the removal of barriers but the conditions around that. It is about getting people to a place where they are willing to take risks but it is also about dealing with the aftermath of the removal of barriers. I feel that the discussion has been very positive. Stephen will talk about the work that we are doing.

Mr Steven McCourt (Department of Justice):

The Minister is keen on working with communities at interfaces in general, because that is the

key to dealing with the structures themselves. In respect of the collaborative approach, what the Minister wants to do — it is, essentially, what is happening at the Alexandra Park and Newington Street areas — is work through the interface working group and interface community partners to identify specific areas where the communities themselves feel that there is the possibility of bringing forward a new approach to interfaces. Through the strategy, the Minister would like to set up an inter-agency group to bring together Departments and agencies so that they can work collaboratively in areas where communities have identified approaches that can be taken forward and that will look at and address their concerns.

Ms J McCann:

You are welcome. In your introductory remarks, you said that prevention and early intervention are essential. Question 3 of the consultation asked:

“How can we support local communities to address anti-social behaviour?”

Funding is obviously limited. Is there a view that funding and resources should be redirected? It is clear that it is more effective when local communities and organisations on the ground are involved in creating safer communities. There seems to be a scarcity of funding for local groups that are working with the PSNI and other justice agencies. Has any thought been given to redirecting some of the current funding into, for instance, the community payback scheme that you mentioned and projects like that?

Question 15 asked what more can be done to empower local communities. There needs to be a new focus on the inclusive approach. We met some of the local community safety organisations, and, although the view seems to be that this is a good way to go, resources and funding do not seem to be being directed towards that approach in the way that they should be. I am thinking of, for example, the success of Belfast City Council’s community safety warden scheme, which could be replicated across other council areas. Has there been a view as to where community safety funding and resources will be directed?

Mr McGeown:

Members will be aware that I spoke last week about PCSPs coming on stream in April 2012. We see the community safety strategy and the policing plan setting the agenda for action for PCSPs. Through the joint committee, we will develop and set strategic objectives for the running of PCSPs, but what those mean locally will be for local communities to decide, working through their PCSP. You have touched on certain issues; if they are the issues that people have identified as key to their particular area and to their needs, we see those finding

their way into the action plan. The answer to your question, then, is that they will be funded through the money that we have set aside for PCSPs, which is a sizeable amount. So, the short answer is that I suspect the money will be there. In fact, I know it will be there. If those are the issues that emerge locally, they will be the ones that will find their way into the plan and be addressed.

Mr Mark Goodfellow (Department of Justice):

When we set the strategic objectives, as Declan said, we will want the PCSPs to submit an action plan that tells us how they will meet those strategic objectives. In that sense, resources will be very much prioritised towards those objectives. It is fair to say that antisocial behaviour is likely to be high on the list of priority areas.

It is also important to say that, in addition to the core funding that will be provided to local partnerships, we can make available additional streams of funding from within the DOJ. The member referred to the wardens scheme. This year alone, the community safety unit invested £250,000 in community safety wardens across Northern Ireland. We hope that the same facility will exist next year. Other additional streams that we may have access to will include criminal assets funding for next year. The Department is currently working up a scheme as to how best to deploy those resources. It is important to make the point that, in addition to the core funding of the partnerships, there will be additional funding streams.

None of what I have said takes account of the fact that we have a match funding ethos as well. For every £1 that we invest in community safety, we insist on a minimum match funding of 20%. Last year alone, that match funding requirement generated an additional £1.2 million for community safety partnerships. So, even the substantial investment that DOJ makes is only a drop in the pond when we consider the match funding element that that levers in from others.

Ms J McCann:

A cross-departmental view has to be taken of early intervention. There is support for it from a lot of people in the community, particularly families whose socio-economic background is difficult. Early intervention is important in combating antisocial activity. Do you get the sense that Departments and organisations are working more closely together to look at particular families that may need a wrap-around service before their young people become involved in antisocial activities in the first place?

Mr McGeown:

The short answer is yes. That theme has emerged over the consultation period. From a DOJ perspective, we have started to become heavily involved in discussions that are held on a cross-departmental and cross-agency basis, not least with respect to the children and young people's strategic partnership, which I mentioned earlier. We now sit on that partnership, and it will meet next month. It seems to be almost the flavour of the month at the moment, which is good, in that a lot of Departments are now starting to get it: the earlier you go in, the more you save in later life. We talk about getting in there from minus nine months and starting to work with people from that time onwards. We are looking at programmes across government that are effective and that have been proven to be so, and we are looking at how they might be rolled out. You will be aware of the family nurse partnership and the roots of empathy programme, for instance, and consideration of those has started. The Department of Justice's view is that, if it has been shown to work and it does work, we will be happy to bring money to the table to support it.

Mr Weir:

It is a very useful report, and its breadth is useful. As you highlighted, the vast number of individuals and groups with whom you consulted gives it a degree of flavour. To some extent, I suppose, a number of the answers within it are reasonably predictable. I think that you could have predicted from the start that people would prefer a better joined-up approach and better working together. To be fair, that, along with early intervention, is the sort of thing that is needed for almost all problems. I am not decrying this, but, if you asked the voluntary and community sector about those issues, it would stress the importance of the voluntary and community sector in providing solutions. Although early intervention makes sense, reference to early intervention from minus nine months would, perhaps, be a little ambitious if taken too literally. It conjures up very strange images.

I want to touch on two aspects. Following on from some of what Jennifer mentioned, there tends to be divergence on ASBOs, as the Chairman mentioned, and dispersal zones. When the question about how best to tackle particular problems is posed, you get a divergence of answers, outside of the fairly obvious solutions of working together and early intervention. There can be some evaluation and working out of what is practical and what is sensible. However, with the best will in the world, for a lot of problems, there may not be an obvious solution or panacea; there can be a range of things. When we are looking at solutions, can there be an examination of some of the areas where there is perhaps division? Is it practical to look at taking small areas and piloting particular schemes to see how things are before they are rolled out, or, if they do not work out, rejected?

There is a serious topic that sometimes gets ignored. Question 11 looks specifically at domestic and sexual violence. Although it is useful that there was a good response on the issue of multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs), you also make reference to a number of projects being best practice. It is useful to identify where there is best practice, but, as part of the conclusions that you reach when identifying best practice, what thought do the Department and others give to ensuring that something is rolled out rather than simply held up as an exemplar? It is all very well to say that there is something very good in a particular area, but, if nothing is done about it, it has limited value.

Mr McGeown:

Mark will pick up on a specific example. The thread of the community safety strategy — certainly when it is rolled out — will be collaborative working, which I will talk about later this afternoon. We are trying to go into a number of pathfinder areas and say, “What are the issues here locally? What are the examples of things that work and, importantly, do not work? How can we make sure that we learn lessons, positive and negative, and roll them out across Northern Ireland?” We are starting to do that. There are parallels between this document and the collaborative working initiative, in that we will test things locally and broaden them out across Northern Ireland.

Mr Weir:

Through that testing, we have to ensure that we are helping to solve a problem rather than simply shifting it. To be fair, I think all of us have, at times, grappled with finding a solution to a problem in our local areas. Perhaps it is a simple solution, such as gating or better lighting in an area. That gets rid of the problem for the residents who are affected, but the problem might pop up half a mile down the road in a different form. The problem is, therefore, not being solved; the pain is simply being shifted.

Mr McGeown:

You are absolutely right. That was the message that came through loud and clear. We do not want to just displace the issues to another area. We want to tackle them early, and that is certainly what we will try to do. Mark, do you want to say a little about MARACs, specifically on domestic violence?

Mr Goodfellow:

Mr Weir, you mentioned multi-agency risk assessment conferencing. It would be remiss of me not to use that as an example of how we have piloted something and evaluated its

effectiveness before rolling it out. MARAC was piloted in one area of Northern Ireland. However, there were more than 200 MARACs operating in GB at that time. So, we looked at best practice in GB and built on the experience of the MARAC pilot, and, as a result, MARAC was introduced right across Northern Ireland. Mr McCrea, who has joined us now, will be well aware of the success of MARAC. The net result was that significantly more than 2,000 high-risk victims of domestic violence have been protected with low levels of repeat victimisation. That is one example of how a pilot has informed our policy development.

I will give an example to address Mr Weir's point — he is absolutely right about this — that one size does not fit all, particularly in the thematic area of antisocial behaviour. The Minister recently visited Derry to hear about a very good example of multi-agency working addressing antisocial behaviour. Various agencies sit around a table and task — it is a tasking list, really — the Housing Executive, the police and other agencies to deal with antisocial behaviour. That is what worked for an area of Derry. The Minister then went to Strabane to hear about a very innovative, creative project that involved young people designing a computer-based programme and a much wider development programme to test specific issues around antisocial behaviour there. That worked for the people of Strabane. So, two very different approaches were taken to deal with one issue, but both of them worked and neither was a one-size-fits-all approach.

Mr A Maginness:

I congratulate you on your work here. An awful lot of consultation has taken place over a relatively short period, and it has borne fruit. As Mr Weir said, there is a certain amount of predictable agreement. Equally, there is a certain amount of disagreement, which is very healthy and good. I am just wondering how you reconcile differences of opinion on a range of different issues. After this very useful exercise, what are the next steps in developing a strategy that you can apply? What approach do you take? Will you devise a strategy for the local partnerships that they can then adapt or can they come up with alternative strategies?

Mr McGeown:

I will pick up on your second point first. What I see happening is that we will develop the strategy, because there will be clear outcomes that we will want to work towards. Those outcomes will find their way into strategic objectives that we will work with the Policing Board to develop, and the objectives will set the agenda for the PCSPs. How the PCSPs translate those objectives locally will be up to them, as long as they develop their initiatives around the high-level objectives and make sure that those translate to a local level.

On your first point about reconciling differences, there are those who want to take a very strong-handed approach and those who want to take an early intervention approach. Our view is that there is a broad spectrum of interventions, from the more punitive to early intervention. What we are saying is that we will suggest the most effective intervention. We are saying to people, “Look, there are all of these steps. Let us work through all of them before you clamp down and say, ‘You now have an ASBO’”. We are trying to say, “Let us work with people early to make sure that we do not get to that stage”. When we do get to that stage, we have probably lost the battle. It is about trying to get in early so that we do not go down that path in the first place. So, there is a broad spectrum. However, if we could, we would want to move towards early intervention. We hope that we do not get to the endgame.

Mr S Anderson:

I am concerned about issues for rural dwellers, which were, I think, mentioned in response to question 9. Antisocial behaviour is perhaps more of an urban problem than a rural one. The report talks about the fear of crime. My experience, over many years, is that there are a lot of people living in isolation in rural areas. As I said in the Chamber, those people lock themselves away in the evening and do not want to come out because they are scared. Even in recent months, we have had gangs roaming the countryside in daylight carrying out break-ins and thefts. That has caused big problems. How do you propose to build confidence in the rural community by working with community groups? Will resources be put in there to tackle that issue? It is a big problem and one that needs to be looked at. We cannot expect the police to be at the end of any rural road at any time of the day. However, more effort and work must be put in to help communities to build confidence and to develop a network of contacts, for example, through local district councils. I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council. That council, through its community safety work, tries to do good work by networking with those people to help them. However, with access to cars and easy access from rural areas onto motorways, gangs can disappear quickly. That concerns me and my rural constituents.

Mr McGeown:

As you know, a key thread of the strategy is that we have to make communities more confident. We heard that in our work with older people in particular, who said they do not want to live in a fortified world. They want to live in a world where they can go out and work and live in the community. We will try to build that confidence. We will also use the strategy to signpost people. If there is a problem, whatever it is, this document will direct them to who is best placed to help, be that the PCSP, a government agency or ourselves. We will make it clear to people that, if there is a problem, they do not need to lock themselves in

— they can go out. There are solutions.

Mr Jones:

You are absolutely right, Mr Anderson. The profile of antisocial behaviour in rural settings differs from the profile in urban settings. The clear message to us during the consultation was that there are issues around social isolation, especially among older people, and fear of crime. It was highlighted to us that there is a sense that they are isolated and have to lock themselves in.

We are taking work forward in a couple of areas. At the departmental level, we are working with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) on its rural policy White Paper, which addresses the wider issues around sustainable rural communities. An important part of that involves community safety issues for rural communities. Of course, once the new PCSPs are established, there will be a clear role for them to link with local rural community groups.

The community safety partnerships have already been doing a lot of inter-generational work, for example. During the consultation, that was highlighted as a key area for addressing antisocial behaviour through building understanding and reducing the mistrust between the younger and older generations. That helps to address issues around fear of crime, especially for older people. Therefore, a key aspect of the strategy will be the need to address inter-generational issues.

As we identified, rural communities have specific needs. A lot of the PCSPs will also be based in rural communities and rural council areas. They will, by their very nature, be taking account of specific community safety issues.

Mr Goodfellow:

The Minister met the Rural Community Network and delivered a separate briefing to it, which was primarily aimed at saying to it that PCSPs are coming downstream and that the Policing Board will shortly be launching a recruitment exercise for independent members of the partnerships. We will try to use the Rural Community Network to consult on our behalf and to encourage people from the rural community to come forward so that we have the proper independent representation on the new partnerships.

I want to mention a number of the rural consultation meetings that Eamon and I went to. You are absolutely right to highlight rural isolation and rural crime. However, on more than

one occasion, people at some of those local consultations told us that they did not have a fear of crime and that crime was not a big issue for them. That is because the sense of community and belonging in some rural areas is often much stronger than in urban areas. The impact of low-cost but high-impact initiatives such as neighbourhood watch and Good Morning schemes can be huge, and they are very well managed in rural areas.

Mr S Anderson:

I take the point that good work has been going on with neighbourhood watch and community associations. However, we need to build on that to ensure that people are given confidence. Depending on where you are, some people in rural areas can be very isolated, and they seem at times to be very easily targeted and identified. There is more work that we can do. Thank you for your answers.

Mr B McCrea:

I apologise for not being here at the start, and I also apologise if you have already answered this question. Paragraph 2.4.4 of the consultation document states that surveys indicate that two in three people think that crime is worse than it actually is. We need to challenge that perception. How do you plan to deal with that?

Mr McGeown:

We are trying to tackle perception. Statistics clearly show that the number of incidents of antisocial behaviour, attacks etc are decreasing, but, in some areas, people's perception is that they are not and that crime is more prevalent. We are trying to build confidence in communities by getting the message to them that things are not as bad as they think but also that, where they feel there are problems, we will work to address them. For us, it is about demonstrating to people that they live in a safe community and showcasing what is there to help them. We need to show that we can get results for people when they do have a problem and ensure that they do not live in fear of crime.

Mr B McCrea:

A report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) identified visibility as the key. People value seeing someone in uniform around and about. They want a quick response when there is a problem, and they like to be informed. Information usually comes in either the newspaper or the mail. I have tried to get the PSNI to do this more, but it might be better if the information comes from other agencies. There is a need to get the information out to individuals that things are not as bad as they think but that, if there is a problem, they can contact their district policing partnership (DPP), community safety partnership (CSP) or

whatever other organisation. To pick up on what Alban said, are there any specific strategies for tackling that issue?

Mr McGeown:

I do not have the answer at this point, but I suspect that the PSNI will be one of the key bodies involved in PCSPs going forward. We will work closely with them to ensure that they get the messages out there and are seen to be effective at a local level. I suspect that somewhere in there will be our strategy of working towards ensuring that there is awareness and that the police are seen to be visible in their communities.

Mr Jones:

A proposal for a communications plan and raising awareness was set out in the consultation. You are absolutely right that getting the message out has to be a key part of what we do. The figures that you refer to of two out of three people thinking that there is more crime today than there was two years ago compares with the British crime survey. If you ask people nationally whether they think that crime is the same, worse or better, they think that crime is getting worse. However, locally, people think that there is no problem. There is a mismatch of perceptions nationally and locally. Engagement with the media and how they report on crime is key to that. Not for one moment are we suggesting, or could we suggest, that we have cracked that nut. Community confidence needs to be developed through engaging with the community and providing information in a range of accessible ways. For example, with young people, we will look at the use of social media and other methods. The police are very active on Facebook and Twitter, and that has proven successful in building confidence and increasing engagement.

Mr B McCrea:

Statistics for the number of people who use Facebook are still not here. I do not want to detain you, because I came in at the end of the session. I will have a look at the tape, because and I am very interested in what you have had to say. However, the media ought to be challenged. Signal crimes are sensationalised, which causes huge fear in a lot of people, particularly the elderly, and that is irresponsible. I have no wish to limit the freedom of the press, but reporting should be responsible and balanced. We have to tackle the issue collectively.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for coming to the Committee, gentlemen.