

CRIME AND COMMUNITY - A LOCAL PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

PAPER BY HMG (9 March)

1. The Government is committed to working in partnership with the community. To that end, this paper addresses the desire of communities and groups to develop appropriate locally based arrangements for dealing with criminal activity, anti-social behaviour and other social problems. There is the opportunity to build on the positive and constructive developments that are taking place in the areas of self-help and community participation, in partnership with the public agencies. What cannot be accepted in any form however are punishment attacks, threats, expulsions, intimidation and boycotts, organised and manipulated by paramilitary groups or under any other auspices.

2. It is clear that most people from the areas concerned want to prevent criminal and anti-social behaviour and the unacceptable response of punishment beatings and other forms of coercion. This can only be achieved successfully through the co-operation of the public agencies, including the police, and the voluntary and community sectors in providing programmes and interventions for those identified as being at risk or responsible for anti-social behaviour. Much is already happening along these lines. The involvement of communities and public representatives, working with public and voluntary agencies, in the management of the response to crime and anti-social behaviour is to be encouraged, so long as this is consistent with the rule

of law and does not lend support to the concept of "alternative justice".

3. Throughout the troubles the public agencies have been in the front line of service delivery to all parts of the community, often in the most difficult circumstances. Schools, the Youth Service, Social Services, the Housing Executive, Probation and the RUC are amongst the agencies in the forefront of social provision and the creation of a safer and better environment. They operate in partnership with each other, with the voluntary sector and with a well developed community infrastructure. There has been much innovation and a great deal has been achieved thanks to the commitment of people from all of the agencies and the community. At the same time it has to be recognised that the political and security background has made it more difficult for the police to operate in certain areas as effectively with the community as they would wish.

4. In addressing these issues and delivering community based services, the Government is committed to:

- i. upholding the rule of law;
- ii. promoting and safeguarding human rights;
- iii. protecting individuals against arbitrary decisions and procedures operating outside the rule of law;

iv. the provision of services to communities and individuals based on consultation and objective assessment of need;

v. partnership and consultation with and between the public, voluntary, community and private sectors.

5. The Government welcomes innovative ideas aimed at empowering communities, in partnership with the public agencies, to improve social cohesion, promote social inclusion, resolve disputes and address the problem of crime and the fear of crime. Subject to the availability of resources and to the parameters set out in paras 7 and 8 below, the public and voluntary agencies are encouraged to support communities which wish, within the law, and in partnership, to embark on initiatives to promote such concepts as community safety, crime prevention, restorative arrangements and mediation. This approach can also help in identifying related social issues such as the availability of training and support services and youth and social facilities.

6. The public organisations meet with and take account of the views of public representatives on these issues. However, decisions on the provision of services for which they are accountable and on the referral and treatment of individuals are matters for the agencies with the relevant statutory responsibilities. Thus an individual case appearing to require intervention might be drawn to the attention of Social Services as a result of a community-based initiative; but it will be for Social Services, in consultation as appropriate with other

agencies, to determine whether, and if so how, to intervene.

7. In the context of preventing offending behaviour or resolving problems arising out of minor disputes or anti-social behaviour, the public agencies will encourage mediation, restorative and other schemes of the kind outlined in para 5 above - provided that they are based on the genuine consent of all parties involved. Such initiatives should not be the preserve of any particular political party or interest group, but rather should involve the community as a whole. There can be no question of assisting, or taking referrals from, any scheme based on coercion or threat, real or implied, or which is predicated on the exclusion of the police or any other public agency from carrying out its functions as prescribed by law. Moreover, the formal processes of investigation, adjudication and compulsory intervention or referral must remain the preserve of the appropriate statutory bodies, operating within the legal framework which protects and balances the interests of individuals and the community.

8. The Government welcomes and encourages community based initiatives, rooted in a partnership approach. Any arrangements however must be complementary to statutory procedures, not an alternative to them.