

## 7/7 and beyond: is anybody listening?

“Another 7/7 is inevitable”, say teenagers from Leeds. “Nobody is listening and the original issues have not been resolved.”

The group of sixth formers from City of Leeds and Primrose Schools were taking part in a video conference link to a group of MPs and peers, faith community leaders and charity representatives meeting in Westminster on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2008.

The meeting was part of a series of conferences organised by South Asian Development Partnership on the theme ‘**7/7 and Beyond: Peace for our Communities**’.

Dr Prem Sharma, Patron of SADP, realised after the first conference in London that the response needed was a long-term, committed campaign for peace. Further conferences were held in Reading, Birmingham, Leeds and London again. They brought together politicians, community leaders, police, and representatives of local government and business - along with young people. Their distinctive feature was a special workshop for teenagers from schools and colleges, who then presented their views to the larger group.

Young people are looking for somebody who will listen: this has been the consistent message from all the conferences. They need ‘safe places’ in which they can express themselves freely and be heard. They feel that ‘the government only listens to drastic actions’ - hence the inevitability of another 7/7. They take note of foreign policy and its impact and believe the media are largely to blame for stereotypes and sensational reporting. They have plenty of advice too for religious leaders and the ‘elders’ in their different communities. Many feel they are being ‘pushed out of society because we don’t fit in’. The resulting feelings of isolation and anger can fuel extremism. They highlight today’s drinking culture as one factor in this.

Some of their feedback has also been captured in a DVD discussion resource that came out of the conferences. ‘**Friends, Strangers, Citizens? Life in Britain post 7/7**’ features community leaders, young people and people on the street giving their views on issues such as the threat of terror, the role of religion, multi-culturalism and freedom of speech. It includes worksheets and guidelines for discussion, and has been taken up by various schools, local councils and community groups. Many have commented on its value in stimulating lively and open discussion and the need to make it widely available. (For more information see: [http://www.southasian.org.uk/resources\\_friends.html](http://www.southasian.org.uk/resources_friends.html)).

Based on the experience of these conferences, SADP calls for a **national strategy** to help people from different backgrounds to engage with each other.

Dr Sharma said “Our goal is quite simple – to help people from different backgrounds to meet, talk and relate to each other, with a particular focus on young people. There is nothing new in this but it clearly needs facilitation, as it isn’t happening enough.”

“We need to **provide opportunities for people to come together locally** for regular open discussion and interaction, using the many existing structures and activities. Schools play a vital role in this and many are already doing it. But it is also important for young people to be able to **engage with key decision makers**.”

Hence the video conference link, which gave the Leeds sixth formers a unique opportunity to connect with their representatives in Parliament. Despite some technical difficulties that evening, the sixth formers felt that they were being listened to.

The meeting suggested models for doing this on an on-going basis, as part of Citizenship or RE classes. It also highlighted the vital need for a **systematic approach**. In many places people are doing excellent work, but it is disjointed. There is very little effective, multi-agency work.

Ram Gidoomal, SADP Chairman, called for a network of **mentors, coaches and community role models**, to help link people together. He recommended using social networking sites like Facebook,

MySpace, Bebo and others. Carl Wonfor of ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) said that they were developing an online forum as part of their efforts to deal with community tensions.

Muslim Forum Chairman Lord Mohammed Sheikh and Shadow Attorney General Dominic Grieve were full of praise for what had been done. The Archbishop of Canterbury, in a message of support, said that this kind of initiative needed to be undertaken widely. Good wishes and encouragement were also received from the Prime Minister's office and from David Cameron.

Is anybody listening? Those at the meeting represented politicians, both local and national, and a range of organisations who are already actively engaging with people of different backgrounds, particularly young people, to facilitate interaction and understanding. They are committed to continue and many expressed their support at the meeting. To what extent will government resources be available to them, to enable the national strategy that is needed?

# The way ahead: models for the future

SADP calls for a national strategy to help people from different backgrounds to meet, talk and relate to each other, with a particular focus on young people.

## 1. Provide opportunities for people to come together locally

There is nothing new in this, but it clearly needs facilitation, as it isn't happening enough.

This has been recognised in the consultation document from Communities and Local Government on an inter-faith strategy ('Face to Face and Side by Side') Section 1, 1.10:

*"...meaningful interaction doesn't just happen and together we need to help create the right conditions and opportunities..."*

## 2. Use existing structures and activities

For example: sports clubs, community associations, residents groups, interfaith groups, parent and toddler groups, book clubs, voluntary organizations, church coffee mornings and many others.

### **Working model: Youth Encounter, Birmingham**

They facilitated the discussions in our first conference in November 2005. They have a lot of experience of bringing young people from different backgrounds together to engage with each other, not just as one-offs but over a period of time.

## 3. Schools have a vital role

Many are already holding this kind of discussion in Citizenship or RE classes.

## 4. Give people the opportunity to engage with key decision-makers

It is important for young people - and all of us - to be able to engage with the decision makers.

### **A possible model:**

Schools could arrange workshops as part of Citizenship or RE classes. A selection of students could then join with groups from other schools for a conference attended by local residents along with local and national politicians, police, community and faith leaders.

### **A further idea:**

An annual video conference in the Attlee Suite, with people from several workshops interacting with MPs, Members of the House of Lords, civil servants and leaders of community projects.

The video conference link between Leeds and Westminster gave sixth formers a unique opportunity to connect with their representatives in Parliament. Despite some technical difficulties, they felt they were being listened to.

## 5. There needs to be a plan and systematic approach

In Leeds and Bradford, for example, we found a number of organisations who are working in this area and would be willing to do things together, for example **Hamara Healthy Living Centre in Leeds**, and **Bradford Faiths Forum**. **JCI (Junior Chamber International)** helped bring them and others together for our conference.

### **But we need to note the comment from Leeds.**

"We need a co-ordinated, effective, multi-agency approach. Right now there are lots of examples of good practice. But it's all disjointed."

## 6. Use key resources

One way to bring things together is to use key resources. We have particularly identified:

### ▪ **Friends, Strangers, Citizens? Life in Britain post 7/7**

This **DVD discussion resource** has proved to be excellent in stimulating lively and open discussion. We would like to see it used as widely as possible.

### ▪ **Mentors, Coaches, Role Models**

These are people who can facilitate visits and meetings, helping to link people together. We need a network of these available for this kind of activity.

## Practical steps to take these proposals forward

### A. Obtain support and endorsement from recognised leaders of all backgrounds.

We already have this from a range of people and organisations. We need to get a broader base, including Government departments, to support a more systematic approach, as illustrated below.

### B. Identify key partners and provide on-going links

Many organisations and individuals are already active in this field. Some of them have links. But as already noted, we need a network that will link people together, enabling them to find partners and resources, and to work together in an 'effective, multi-agency approach'.

We propose

- set up a dedicated website (either existing or newly created). We need to identify the organisation that will do this and the resources to enable it to happen.
- use social networking sites like Facebook and others. This again requires identifying people and resources.
- facilitate local networks and activities. Again, this takes time and resources.

### C. Promote and use existing resources

We recommend wide distribution of '**Friends, Strangers, Citizens? Life in Britain post 7/7**'. It should be made available to all the 5000+ secondary schools in the country, along with similar resources or activities that promote open discussion and interaction.

## A systematic approach could look like this:

