

Speech to the Community Foundation's EGM event – launch of Merseyside Young Transformers Programme by Rt Hon George Howarth MP

Thursday 8 November 2007

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this exciting development as the Merseyside Young Transformers programme is launched today.

Politicians spend a considerable amount of time talking about antisocial behaviour. And when I sit in the chamber of the House of Commons during Prime Minister's Question Time, I sometimes wonder whether that is because we are so practiced at behaving in an antisocial way.

But there is an important point here: we tend to focus on antisocial behaviour because of the hugely damaging effects it can have on young people as well as its impact on the wider community. Talking tough on antisocial behaviour plays well in the media, and it is right that we should not tolerate behaviour which can have a devastating impact on the lives of those people unfortunate enough to be their victims.

Yet as a parent, I am all too well aware that telling young people not to do something can often be the best way to make sure that they go straight out and do it. Simply telling people to stop behaving disruptively is unlikely to be very effective. And although tough sanctions need to be there, we should recognise that they have only limited value because many young people simply do not believe they will be caught.

So with all this attention paid to antisocial behaviour, we sometimes need to remind ourselves that it is also important to focus energy on helping young people to discover new opportunities, to build their self-esteem, to become confident and capable. Those objectives are at the heart of the Merseyside Young Transformers programme and that is why I am particularly keen to support this new initiative.

I have had the privilege of representing Merseyside for over 20 years in Parliament. Over that time, I have seen many children grow up. Some have gone on to great things: they have studied, found fulfilling jobs, and in many cases started their own families.

In other cases, I have seen families struggle with the pressures of bringing up their children. And there have been tragic cases where promising young children have had their enthusiasm for life and their inspiring curiosity gradually but relentlessly whittled away.

A lack of structure in their lives, far too few positive role models and a lack of vision about what they could achieve leaves them without a sense of purpose, with no direction. It is hardly surprising that they end up drifting into a self-destructive cycle of decline.

I was very struck by statistic I read recently. Despite the dramatic improvement in employment prospects in my constituency over the last 10 years, if you live in Knowsley North and Sefton East you are still three and a half times more likely to be unemployed than if you happen to live in Kensington and Chelsea. These

constituencies may be close to each other in the alphabet, but the opportunities available to young people in each area are still worlds apart

I came into politics because I wanted to improve people's lives and reduce these inequalities. I want to see a society where children born in my constituency understand that they too can achieve just as much as someone born in Kensington and Chelsea.

There are three complimentary strands of government policy which need to come together to achieve this:

One. Government services need to be properly resourced and relentlessly focus on meeting the needs of their core users.

Over the past 10 years the Government has significantly increased funding to services such as the police, education and local authorities so we have made some very significant progress. However, I believe there are still things that we can and must do to improve the performance of those services.

Two. As individuals, we all have social responsibilities which come hand in hand with our rights to expect high quality public services.

Three. We need to develop the role of community more effectively.

Of all of these three areas, communities have the most potential to create environments which foster all those things I talked about earlier: self esteem, confidence, and a meaningful future – things which would give young people positive reasons for staying out of trouble.

In recent years, the public policy debate has focused on improving government services and increasing funding. Given the parlous state that they were in 10 years ago, that was the right thing to do then.

We also focused on the responsibilities of individuals to act as better citizens. That was also necessary because it is the actions of individuals that we are ultimately seeking to influence.

Just as it was right to focus on those areas, it is now important to pay far more attention to empowering local communities.

Genuinely community-led initiatives are important because they have the support of local people. And local people tend to focus on the issues which most impact on their lives.

It is right that Government, which after all is elected by the people, should set priorities, objectives and overall direction. But how that is implemented on the ground should wherever possible be up to local people.

Where there is a sense of local ownership, initiatives are more likely to succeed. They are more likely to be appropriate to the needs of local people, and shaped in a way which makes sense to their lives.

I am therefore extremely pleased when initiatives like this bring together different groups and organisations from across the community.

Merseyside Police are offering visionary leadership, and there are lessons here which should be learnt across the country about how to structure effective partnership arrangements. They are helping residents to take the lead in reclaiming their streets and living without fear of crime.

The programme is also looking to other countries to learn from their experiences: the Tutu foundation will bring benefits beyond its own experiences and expertise in South Africa of working to tackle gangs and gun culture. Young people here in Merseyside will learn about other countries, have their horizons expanded and I hope will begin to imagine a bigger future for themselves.

We also have support of the Liverpool Echo. In an age when we know that horror story headlines sell newspapers, it is easy to understand why there seems to be a never-ending stream of bad news stories. Yet here is a very clear example of the media focusing on a positive initiative. So I look forward to reading about the success stories coming out of Merseyside Young Transformers programme.

The Co-operative Bank, which has a long history of positive social contributions, stands out as a good example of a commercial organisation taking seriously its responsibilities as a good corporate citizen.

And the Department for Children, Schools and Families which has had the vision to support initiatives such as this that empower local community action.

It is genuinely encouraging that so many different organisations have come together to support this programme that has the potential to make such a dramatic transformation to individuals and the community.

As a local MP, I intend to make the case for more community-led initiatives like this. I came into politics to make a difference to people's lives, and this is precisely the sort of initiative that can do just that.

In conclusion, today is a celebration of the beginning of some extremely positive and necessary work. Young people who come into this programme will have their aspirations raised, and it is up to all of us to make sure that there are real processes in place which will allow them to make the right choices in life.

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