

## JOY-RIDING CHILDREN

Summary of a meeting held in The Beeches, Hampton Park, Belfast on Thursday 26 June 1980 at 10.00 am.

### PRESENT AND APOLOGIES

1. A list of those who attended the meeting is appended. Apologies were received from Mr Martin, Department of Education, Mr Denvir, St Paul's Secondary School and Mr Patrick, Probation and After-Care Service.

### INTRODUCTION

2. Mr Hayes welcomed the participants to the follow-up meeting and in particular, the three mothers from the Divis/Lower Falls area, who would have a valuable contribution to make. It had emerged clearly from the first meeting that there was no easy or rapid solution to the problem of joy-riding, which was closely connected with the deep seated, social and economic problems in West Belfast. A number of initiatives, however were being undertaken, including the pilot scheme by a group in West Belfast. Since the last meeting he had discussed the scheme in confidence with the group and it was important that they should be allowed to try out their ideas with as little publicity as possible. In opening the discussion he invited Mr Orr to outline the results of a survey on joy-riding in West Belfast undertaken by the Department of Education.

### SURVEY ON JOY-RIDING IN WEST BELFAST

3. Mr Orr explained that following the last meeting a survey had been carried out in the secondary schools in West Belfast, 6 boys' and 4 girls' schools, the Principals of which had been asked to complete an anonymised questionnaire on pupils whom they considered likely to be involved in joy-riding. Three girls' schools were unable to supply any data, as they did not know of any of their pupils being involved. One girls' school supplied data on 4 pupils, while all 6 boys' schools were able to return questionnaires. It was estimated that approximately 70 pupils were involved in joy-riding, but it was not possible from the questionnaires to identify any pupils personally.

4. The survey suggested that the vast majority of pupils suspected of joy-riding (84%) were aged 14 and 15, in the third and fourth years at secondary schools. 60% of the pupils had received special remedial help at some stage in the secondary school. On a subjective assessment by Principals of attainment and intelligence, 2/3rd were rated as of low attainment and 1/3rd of average attainment. About half of

the pupils were considered to be of low intelligence and half of average intelligence, while 2 of the 70 were regarded as highly intelligent. The attendance of 19% of the pupils was classified as fair and of 69% as poor. The pattern of attendance of the 70 pupils over their school careers was significant: good and average attendance in the 1st year fell in the 3rd and 4th years, while poor attendance rose consistently over the 4 years. 1/3rd of the pupils were engaged in courses leading to external examinations, with the remainder in non-examination classes. Only very small proportions of the pupils took part in any school-organised extra-curricular activities or attended a youth club or regular youth activities. The majority of pupils had both parents at home, while the information about employment which was available for some of the pupils, revealed that both parents were unemployed in 25 homes and employed in 13 homes, the father only was employed in 12 homes and the mother only in 7 homes.

5. In discussion, some participants suggested that the home and employment backgrounds of the pupils were not untypical of those of any pupil in the area. Mr Vallely spoke of his perception of the problem. In his experience it was not a new phenomenon, being found among some children in primary schools as long ago as ten years. The background of the children and their pattern of school attendance varied. They frequently came from homes in which depression and drinking were factors. Joy-riding was seldom the children's sole problem; they were likely also to be involved in shoplifting and breaking and entering. Among older children engaged in joy-riding, there tended to be a major problem of under-age drinking. Support was needed both for the children and their parents, who required training and encouragement.

#### ABSENTEEISM AND NON-ATTAINMENT

6. There was considerable discussion about the problems of absenteeism and of alienation of young people. It was suggested for example that in the Lower Falls area it was rapidly becoming the norm among 13+ year olds not to attend school. There was frequently no motivation to do so, when 50% or more of school leavers had little prospect of employment.

7. Mr Orr outlined some of the initiatives being undertaken by schools and by the Department of Education in an attempt to deal with these problems. Some schools were realising the importance of improving relationships with pupils, particularly those in the 4th and 5th year non-examination classes, in which attendance falls off markedly as pupils reject school or the education which they are offered. One initiative was to appoint one teacher as a class teacher for 25-30 periods per week, thus maintaining contact and establishing rapport with the pupils.

Evidence suggested that attendance improved significantly in classes where a class teacher was employed. Attention was being paid to the need to develop a curriculum which is relevant to the needs of pupils, for example by including modules on work experience, community service, residential courses and physical and practical activities. Other important initiatives included the placing of a Youth Tutor on the staff of a school and incorporating the philosophy of the Youthways scheme into the thinking of schools.

8. There was general support for the view that non-attenders were at risk and that schools should be encouraged to seek to counteract absenteeism by making curricula as relevant as possible, and to place the various initiatives high on their lists of priorities. While the Youthways scheme was commended, one participant commented that it could not resolve all the difficulties. Problems remained when a young person left a Youthways course and then faced chronic oftenlong-term unemployment. This, associated with the many other conditions of disadvantage in West Belfast, led to apathy, of which joy-riding was but one manifestation.

9. Concern was expressed by several participants about the problem of pupils who were being expelled or suspended by schools in West Belfast, often without any reason being given, and with parents and community workers experiencing difficulty of access to school staff when explanations were sought. This question, of which the Department of Education were aware, led to some discussion on the importance of communication between schools on the one hand and parents and community workers on the other, the latter often having a global view of the problems in the area. The Home/School Links scheme was well developed, and valuable in this context, but could not, of course, operate if one side terminated the dialogue. Reference was made also to the apparent breakdown in the Education Welfare Service, which did not appear to some participants to be able to pick up children with school attendance problems at an early stage. It was agreed that these were important problems which merited further consideration.

#### PERCEPTION OF PROBLEM BY MOTHERS

10. It was suggested by one mother that the problem of joy-riding in Divis was neither confined to teenagers, nor exclusively to one sex; children of as young as 7 and 8 were involved and often learned about joy-riding by watching older children. They frequently turned to joy-riding out of boredom, having virtually no outlets for their energies. There was, for example, an almost total lack of play facilities for young children in the Lower Falls area, particularly after school hours. One exception was the Centre in St Peter's School, Raglan Street, which provided a valuable resource for young children in the 5-10 age group,

who could play in safety and with stimulation. The Centre catered for over 40 children, mostly girls, and attempted to deal with their emotional, social, physical and intellectual needs. It was suggested that further centres of this nature could greatly reduce the problem of joy-riding.

11. St Peter's is also the base for a project run jointly by the Education and Library and Health and Social Services Boards, which is concerned primarily with offering educational experiences for women in a local setting. Opportunities exist for women to attend classes in Sociology, A Level English, French, Keep Fit and Home Economics. It provides them with time to articulate their interests and needs, as well as the opportunity to examine their own experiences of life. Mrs McGuire was anxious to draw attention to the importance of this experience for women who are mothers, because it enables them to have confidence to play a more supportive role within their own families and communities.

#### POSSIBLE INITIATIVES

12. Several participants put forward suggestions for ameliorating the joy-riding problem. Mr McDermott felt that significant improvement could be achieved by the further development of the Youth Tutor scheme, the provision of additional Drop-In Centres for 5-10 year olds, and the appointment of more Detached Youth Workers. Mr McLaughlin spoke of his experience as a Detached Youth Worker in the Greater Ballymurphy area, where boredom and lack of facilities were factors leading to joy-riding, vandalism and drinking. Moyard faced similar problems to Divis and Turf Lodge. The estate had very few teenagers, but a very large population in the 7-12 age group. Within 4 to 5 years, those children would be teenagers and the majority would be out on the streets because of lack of facilities. In his view, there was a need for greatly increased outdoor provision, adventure playgrounds and Drop-In Centres. Miss McDaid called for the further provision of Youth Clubs and Drop-In Centres, and for more realistic entrance charges at Leisure Centres, which many young people could not afford to attend.

13. Mr McHenry stressed the importance of ensuring that help for the children involved was provided almost on a one to one basis, and was seen as separate from the school system by which they were rejected and from which they felt alienated. The great need, he felt, was to provide young people with physical activities into which their energies could be channelled. These might include community projects, the Canadian system of 'Casual Labour Centres', Pool and Snooker Centres, and Motor Cycle Clubs.

14. There was a general plea for greater emphasis on prevention, for example the security of keys in car showrooms, and a publicity campaign to encourage drivers to ensure that their cars were immobilised. Chief Superintendent Dobson urged the importance of viewing joy-riding not just as a police problem, but as one concerning also the family and the community. Referring to the community relations role of the police and to the Juvenile Liaison Scheme, he stressed the value of close co-operation between the police and schools in attempting to help joy-riding children.

#### CONCLUSION

15. Mr Hayes thanked the participants for their contribution to the discussion. Both the Departments of Education and Health and Social Services were aware of many of the problems which had been raised and would need to consider what scope might exist for further development. The various threads emerging from the two meetings would now be drawn together and, while he did not envisage that the group would meet again, he would like to keep open the option of talking individually to participants and perhaps to visit some facilities. In the light of the discussions, he felt that high-profile involvement in this sensitive area could be counter-productive, and those already active in the field should be allowed to proceed with as little publicity as possible. He encouraged participants to contact him if they were experiencing any specific difficulties in their work with joy-riding children, in particular, if they were being inhibited by inter-agency barriers. He would then ensure that any problem identified was referred to the appropriate Department for action.