

Burnley Speaks, Who Listens...



A Summary of the Burnley Task Force Report
On the disturbances in June 2001

Chair's Introduction

Introduction from Tony Clarke, Chair of Burnley Task Force

At the end of July, I was invited to act as independent Chair to the Task Force set up to examine the sad events that occurred in Burnley on the 23rd to 25th June 2001. Having seen the Terms of Reference that were set by the Task Force following a Borough-wide Conference shortly after the disturbances, I agreed.

My first visit to Burnley took place on Wednesday 1st August and since that date I have visited the town on 32 days. Throughout this enquiry I have endeavoured to meet and consult with as many people, groups and organisations as possible to ensure that all views on the disturbances and their causes can be taken into account. Inevitably, it has not been possible to meet everyone who has something to contribute to the consultation process. Nevertheless, the decision taken by the Task Force to consult as widely as possible has, in my view, been met.

Early discussions and consultations suggested to us that the issues of concern to people were far broader and deeper than the Terms of Reference initially envisaged. For this reason the Task Force decided that it would be important not to strictly adhere to the Terms of Reference but to take the opportunity to examine the wider issues raised. In our view, it would have been a mistake not to listen to the genuinely held views that may assist Burnley in addressing the many social, economic and community problems it appears to be facing at the present time.

Burnley is an East Lancashire town of some 90,000 people set in the hill country of the Pennines. Its growth and development in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is attributed to traditional textile and heavy engineering industries. Like many communities in the North West, it is a town in slow transition. Manufacturing still accounts for more than a third of jobs in the Borough. However, increasing unemployment, derelict and outdated buildings and infrastructure, significant in-work poverty due to low wage levels, and an under-skilled workforce combined with under-attainment at school, remain key features of the local economy.

Burnley's population includes a significant minority ethnic community. Estimated at around 7% of the population and mainly of South Asian heritage, it is geographically concentrated in one ward: Daneshouse. In the Index of Multiple Deprivation (2000) Daneshouse is shown as the most deprived ward in the Borough and among the worst 1% in England.

Low value Victorian terraced housing is the dominant feature of Burnley's housing. Many are in poor condition and carry high costs of repair. In inner Burnley it is estimated that around 15% of these properties are vacant and nearly 27% are unfit as homes. There are only four local authority areas in the country where private sector housing is in a worse condition or where there is a lower demand for private sector homes.

Many households in Burnley experience real poverty. 40% of homes in Burnley are dependent on some sort of state benefit and 42% of children are eligible for free school meals. Around 30% of all of East Lancashire's Income Support claimants live in inner Burnley. Household income deprivation shows that Daneshouse ward is among the most deprived in England. Only 7 wards out of 8414 are more deprived.

Burnley residents also suffer from relative ill-health, with worse than national average incidences of premature death from coronary heart disease, cancers and respiratory diseases. Burnley also has very high levels of teenage pregnancy, mental illness and increasingly high levels of drug and alcohol misuse.

All of these factors impact upon the education and skills attainment of Burnley residents. Four of Burnley's 16 wards are within the worst 20% in England. 6 out of 8 secondary schools in the Borough are below the English average for attaining 5 GCSE A to C grades, with 3 significantly below.

High crime rates are also evident in Burnley, especially inner Burnley. The reduction of crime and the fear of crime is seen as a key factor in encouraging people to stay in the inner Burnley communities. In the year to July 2001, 44% of all crime in the Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale police area took place in Burnley, whilst the Borough's population accounts for just 34% of the same area.

In almost every sense it is clear that, whilst Burnley is not a city, it experiences all of the chronic problems associated with inner city deprivation.

The Task Force's report deals at some length with a number of distinct but, in many ways, interrelated areas of concern. Where appropriate, the Task Force makes recommendations that it feels can assist a better understanding between sections of the community and to remedy some of the real and very serious problems that many people face in Burnley.

Turning to 23rd to 25th June, I have had the opportunity to meet and discuss with a number of people who witnessed those events. As a result of what I have heard, I am convinced that what was described as a 'race riot' was in fact a series of criminal acts, perpetrated by a relatively small number of people.

Certainly racial intolerance played a significant role in those disturbances; the confrontations that took place were clearly identified as aggression and violence by both white people and those from within the Asian Heritage communities. However, in my view, the label of 'race riot' does the people of Burnley a grave disservice.

The membership of the Task Force has worked extremely hard over the last four months. It has been ably supported by the dedicated and committed staff from Burnley Borough Council. I would particularly like to pay tribute to the younger members of the Task Force who have reached out to the youth of Burnley in a number of important ways. Their contribution should be seen as a sign of great hope for the town.

Nobody can predict if Government at a local, regional or national level will act on the findings and recommendations contained in the report. If, however, the clear warning signs about the levels of deprivation, the lack of effective communication with the people of the town and the disillusionment felt by many young people in Burnley are ignored, then our time will have been wasted and an opportunity for real change and progress will have been lost.

What is clear to me and the rest of the Task Force is that, despite the problems that exist, the vast majority of the people of Burnley have tremendous heart, generosity and determination to build a better future for their town.

I should draw the attention of readers to the fact that Burnley Task Force has been established and has operated in a unique way. It is completely different to the other government-sponsored reports following the disturbances of last summer. Burnley Task Force was set up by the people of Burnley following the Community Conference which was organised by Burnley Council shortly after the disturbances. Its members are all drawn from Burnley, apart from myself as the independent Chair. They have given their considerable time on a voluntary basis.

Throughout the period of the Task Force, the community has been involved integrally and at every stage. The Task Force's report will go to the follow up Community Conference in January. This will be the opportunity for the people of Burnley to discuss our findings, identify any gaps and debate the ways forward. I know they will do this with their usual energy and commitment to make Burnley a better place for all.

What Happened and Why?

The first part of the Task Force's job was to investigate what exactly happened on the 23rd to 25th June and what caused the disturbances.

Having taken evidence from many sources, some of whom had directly witnessed the events and some who were relating what they had heard from others, the Task Force concluded:

1. That the disturbances were caused originally by criminal acts involving both Asian and White criminal gangs which were followed by deliberate attempts to turn the violent acts into racial confrontation.
2. That there were elements within both the White and Asian communities that were already prepared for the confrontations that took place.

Specifically, on 22nd June there was a clash between two criminal groups, one Asian and one White. Misinformation was spread in both communities after this incident which led to large scale confrontation between Whites and Asians. A number of people informed the Task Force that they had heard rumours earlier on the 23rd June that “something was going to happen”.

The Task Force also concluded that, “there is no doubt that... white racists took advantage to exacerbate the situation and to promote disharmony.” A minority of these people are believed not to have been residents of Burnley but outsiders bent on causing trouble.

Of course, these were the immediate causes and the Task Force proposes some immediate solutions, such as better liaison between the Police and the Borough and County Councils to provide intelligence and early warning of similar trouble erupting in the future. But the events of late June 2001 did not come out of the blue.

There were long-term, underlying reasons as well as the immediate triggers, and much of the Task Force’s investigation was concerned with identifying these, and the long-term solutions which would prevent the build-up of tensions between communities.

Disturbance or Riot?

On a number of occasions the Task Force has been criticised for describing the events of June 23rd to 25th as ‘civil disturbances’. The Task Force want to make it clear that Burnley does not deserve a reputation as being a riotous town.

It accepts that criminal acts and criminal damage took place during the period 23rd to 25th June. Nevertheless it is felt that, bad as they were, the incidents should not be described as ‘riots’. At the same time it respects those who have differing views on the terminology used.

Listening to the People

From the start, Burnley Task Force adopted a people-centred approach. The Task Force itself was largely made up of community leaders and everyone other than the Chair worked and/or lived in Burnley.

In order to get as wide a range of views as possible in a short time, the Task Force adopted a variety of approaches to encourage people to come forward:

- A short questionnaire was sent to every household in the borough and this produced 4,500 replies – one in ten of all households. While this may not seem very much, it is by far the biggest response to any questionnaire circulated in Burnley on any subject in recent years and demonstrates how strongly people feel about the situation.
- People who reply to such questionnaires, as the Council has found in the past, tend to be middle-aged or older, and white. While their views are important, given the nature of the disturbances, the Task Force was keen to hear the views of young people (Asian and White) and those of the Asian communities generally. This meant using other approaches.
- Apart from the first meeting, held in the Town Hall, each Task Force meeting was held in a community venue across the areas of Burnley most affected by the events. Each meeting was preceded by a public participation session. In all, about 240 members of the public attended these meetings and gave their views.
- Residents were also invited, via the press and media, to write to the Task Force giving their views and ideas and this produced over 240 letters and e-mails, all of which were read and analysed. As with the survey, most were from older White residents.
- The Task Force also set up a website which was visited over 700 times during a two month period.
- The views of young people were obtained through a questionnaire put together by the youth representatives on the Task Force and distributed in schools, youth centres and recreation centres used by young people. The Youth Arts Partnership also organised graffiti boards on which young people could write their comments anonymously and organised arts-based workshops with young people.

The Chair of the Task Force personally attended parish and residents' meetings and met with many councillors, community leaders and organisations. He also held one-to-one meetings or phone conversations with over 100 individual residents and visited all the areas affected by the disturbances.

What the Task Force heard

The key messages that the people of Burnley communicated to the Task Force were:

- That the poor quality of housing, especially older private housing, is a major factor in creating dissatisfaction in all communities. Abandoned and derelict properties in particular present opportunities for drug-related and other anti-social or criminal behaviour.
- That the Asian and White communities live separate and parallel lives and have very few ways of learning from and understanding one another's cultures and beliefs.
- Segregated neighbourhoods create segregated schools so that even young people, who are generally more open and less prejudiced than their elders in both communities, have little chance to interact with other young people from different cultures.
- That many White people resent what they see as preferential treatment of Asian communities and neighbourhoods and that the Council has been poor at providing information and explanations about its funding decisions.
- That the practice of employing only Asian workers to work in mainly Asian areas and White workers to work in mainly White areas has further divided the communities on ethnic grounds.
- That leadership, vision and civic pride are lacking at all levels of society in Burnley and in both Asian and White communities. This applies to local politicians, community leaders and faith leaders.
- That the local media and press, although not deliberately, played a part in exacerbating racial tensions by the way they chose to cover news stories in the weeks leading up to the disturbances.
- That drug-related crime is often at the root of community conflict and is not being tackled with the urgency it deserves.

What the Task Force recommends

The Task Force came up with over eighty recommendations in the full report and only the main ones are summarised here.

Planning for future disturbances

- Improved liaison between the Police, Borough and County Councils for the purposes of intelligence gathering and early warning.

Housing

- Several recommendations to the Government and others to take much more seriously the housing problems in Burnley and make money available to tackle them.
- Local action to tackle derelict properties and rubbish and better regulation of private landlords and tenants.
- Improved ethnic monitoring and action to encourage ethnic minority households to move into social rented housing.

Community Relations

- Much better information and communications about the reasons for giving funding to different neighbourhoods and ethnic minority communities.
- More effort and funding to be put into race relations work.
- Asian community leaders need to overcome their own internal divisions.
- All sections of the community should be encouraged to debate the issues openly and constructively.

Voluntary and Community Organisations

- Restructuring needed for the benefit of the community, in particular to engage women and young people better.

Burnley Council

- Needs a professional communications unit.
- Keep on improving the relationship with the County Council.

- Work on developing clear leadership and vision for the people of Burnley and Padiham.

Regeneration

- Develop a Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy for the whole borough.
- More regeneration funding to be used to support activity which involves both White and Asian communities.
- Government and European regeneration funding for Burnley should recognise that it is a town but with all the problems of an inner city area.

Burnley's economy

- Economic strategy needs to pay as much attention to supporting manufacturing industry as it does to the newer, high growth sectors of the economy.
- All those involved with economic development need to consider how their efforts can benefit the most deprived communities in the borough.

The Police

- Provide a 'drugs line' for people to contact the Police on drug-related matters and give people confidence that drugs are high on the Police agenda.
- Better co-ordination with social services about young people at risk.

The Media

- Need to develop strategies for fair reporting of issues which could give rise to racial tensions.

Education

- Issues of race and culture need to be tackled at primary school level to avoid some of the deeply entrenched views expressed by children aged 12 years old and younger
- The system for the allocation of school places needs to be reviewed.

Youth and Community

- Exchange visits between youth centres so that young people from different communities can mix.
- Recruit more minority ethnic youth workers to work in all areas, not just Asian areas.
- More Government and Lottery funding for youth work which tackles issues of race and culture.
- All organisations providing youth work activities should concentrate more on multi-cultural activities.

Crime and Disorder

- Burnley Community Safety Partnership to prioritise action to reduce drug-related crime and the sale of alcohol to minors.
- Drugs Action Team to find ways of making earlier treatment available to drug users.

The Young People's Group

The Young People's Group played a vital role in the work of the Task Force, both in expressing their own views to people in authority and in obtaining the views of many other young people in the borough. They will be producing their own full report. They are also planning a celebratory event in the new year.

Burnley Youth Theatre is hoping to create a performing arts project involving young Asian and White men, partly to document what happened in June and partly to tackle the issues arising.

In the main household survey 42% of those replying felt that providing more activities aimed at younger people was a very important priority with a further 34% saying that this would be helpful in preventing further disturbances in the future.

Who's listening?

Launched on the same day as the report on the disturbances in Oldham and a national enquiry into community relations, the Burnley Task Force report has received a great deal of national as well as local attention. Government is listening to Burnley at the highest level and the next few months presents perhaps the biggest opportunity the borough has ever had to press its case for Government support to tackle the underlying causes of the trouble.

Locally, a Strategic Partnership is being set up involving all sectors of the community, businesses, local authorities and other public bodies which will be responsible for making sure that the local recommendations of the report are followed up.

Conclusion and Next Steps

“Communities should be working together, should be building up bridges.....”

During the past four months I have enjoyed my many visits to Burnley. I anticipate that I shall have the pleasure to come back on a number of occasions as the contents of the Task Force report are considered by the various agencies and organisations to whom its recommendations are directed.

It has been a privilege to lead the Task Force, good and straight speaking people, who live or work in Burnley, who sought nothing, simply to serve their fellow citizens in an attempt to make their town a safer and better place, not for themselves, but for the present generation and those who will follow.

My thanks to all who have contributed to our work. Whilst it is not possible to thank each person separately, I would like to extend thanks to my fellow members of the Task Force for their patience with me and for the dedication they gave throughout the period. In my view they have served Burnley very well indeed. In particular, I would pay tribute to the younger members who added a dimension of consultation with an understanding of the young people of the town. That they gave so much of their time, whilst still pursuing their studies, was a good example of the hope that Burnley can have for the future.

Officers and staff of Burnley Borough Council have provided tremendous support, both in administrative and domestic matters. At all times they have given their help generously and professionally and I am most grateful to each and every one of them. At no time had anybody sought to influence my views on the many issues that touch upon the business of the Council.

Finally, I would like to thank the many people of Burnley who have put up with my questions and intrusions, and for the warm friendship they have given to me, a stranger in their midst. My sincere hope is that we have done some good for them. There are no easy answers to some of the deep rooted problems that they themselves have identified during the consultation process. Equally, I fervently hope that those who can, will provide the means to tackle the issues, and do so as quickly as possible.

LORD TONY CLARKE
CHAIR, BURNLEY TASK FORCE
December 2001

Do you want to know more?

Visit the Task Force website at:

www.burnleytaskforce.org.uk

A copy of the full report can be obtained from Burnley Council price £26.66 including postage (£20.86 if you collect it yourself from the Town Hall). Write, enclosing a cheque for the required amount made out to Burnley Borough Council, to:

The Reception,
Town Hall,
Manchester Road,
Burnley
Lancs
BB11 1JA

Tel: 01282 425011

or call in to the Town Hall reception desk.

Reference copies have been placed in the main local libraries.