

By Mo Chaudry

Recent headlines such as 'Extremists recruit school children' and 'BNP makes big inroads in Stoke' naturally get media attention.

But why do these things happen? And what can we do to solve disharmony?

I am proud to be British and a Muslim. I am also well-placed to give an informed view of the issues that confront us.

Even though we live in a country that is generally just and tolerant, we can lose sight of what is happening in our midst. Stoke on Trent suffers from social deprivation and racial tension.

What's more, the person who shouts loudest is often the one who is heard – regardless of their message. Look at the progress the BNP has made in Stoke. It is a negative party which simply seeks to capitalise on people's disillusion with Government as well as their fears about issues such as immigration and terrorism.

Another negative force is the kind of extremism propagated by a small number of religious zealots who wish to set one community against another for their own incoherent reasons.

But people *are* unhappy with what traditional politicians have to offer. They see respect and trust replaced by favouritism and discrimination.

Too often success and progress is not determined by skill, ability and ambition, but rather by favour or privilege.

Our problems are not necessarily racial but they do reflect a lack of communication and trust between communities. In short, people are generally ignorant of how others think and live.

My recent TV project gave me the opportunity to live an anonymous life at the sharp end. I was sent to a rough area of Leeds, where I lived with real people facing real issues. Many of society's decision-makers never do this.

I saw goodness but I also heard extremist opinions and examples of a ghetto mentality. I met young people who see no future, and have no aims, purpose or ambition. What's more they distrust of other communities.

There was crime, anti-social behaviour and racism. I was genuinely shocked. These people felt useless and unwanted. And I know that there are many like them here in The Potteries.

Why were you shocked? What did you see (specifically)? What did people say to you? Why do you think it's the same in Stoke?

I was shocked with people's general negative attitude and distrust towards other communities. I met young graduates who had effectively given up trying to make progress as they genuinely felt victimised that the doors of opportunity were closed to them not just because of their colour but also because of their religious believes.

I have had the same response from youths in Stoke, they are perhaps not as vocal but the underlying issues and insecurities are very much there.

We ignore this problem at our peril.

All over the country, huge amounts of public money have been spent trying to tackle these issues. Yet most of this cash goes into infrastructure and staffing new council and voluntary organisations. Little is left for delivery

I don't have all the answers. But I think that, at least in Stoke, there is now an opportunity for like-minded people to make a positive contribution to bringing our community together.

Young people are impressionable. They can easily be led or misled. We have to look closely at families and schools – because the direction our lives take is determined by our upbringing and the environment in which we live.

Until we get inside the heads of youngsters, we will never solve their problems. We need to change the mindset of all young people, starting from an early age.

Most important is that young people should be inspired and motivated by role models. Regrettably not all today's role models are positive.

Too many role models glorify anti-social behaviour, gangs, drugs, gun culture and even terrorism.

We must organise a system of developing positive role models and creating a framework to get them to invigorate, motivate and inspire the young.

We should have mentors who can meet and advise youngsters, advising them into adulthood.

Imagine the results of getting youngsters to be inspired by successful self-made, local people. We need to find successful individuals from our communities with whom teenagers can connect. There are many – from John Caudwell to Phil Taylor, Imran Sherwani and Jonny Wilkes and others.

We would be empowering kids to determine their own destinies, using their energies for the good. We would be giving them the tools to become good citizens.

This concept can be used within schools, youth offender centres, colleges or universities. It is the process of winning the hearts and minds.

It has to be organised and focused. It also needs to galvanise those of us who are usually apathetic and divorced from politics or religion. It needs to persuade us, the silent majority, to get involved.

Young people would be encouraged by these mentors to mix and integrate (maybe through a range of inter-community, cultural and sporting events?). Mentors would help ensure that religion is divorced from hatred and discrimination. **I want to work with other organisations to create a programme to deliver this initiative.**

There are many of us in Stoke-on-Trent who believe that the existence of groups like the BNP stifles regeneration and discourages companies from investing here.

We should take on these groups by providing future generations with better, more positive role models.

I believe that our city is on the cusp of great progress. Mentoring our youngsters will help ensure that this opportunity is not wasted.

