Communities Scrutiny Committee
Themed Review 2018-19
Public Health Approach to Reducing Violent Crime

Chair’s Introduction

The Communities Scrutiny Committee spent 2018/2019 reviewing the public health approach to reducing violent crime: both its defining characteristics and how it is being implemented in the borough. We know that as a preventative approach to violence, it has a track record of positive outcomes – one of the best known examples being that of Glasgow and its violence reduction unit. Following London’s new Violence Reduction Unit – its response to the epidemic of violent, youth and knife crime in the capital – Waltham Forest has set itself the goal of strengthening its own public health approach to reducing violent crime. This report explores how this has been done to date and puts forward a number of recommendations on how our approach can be further improved. The five recommendations made below rely heavily on the vital input of our services and on the body of research commissioned by the Council regarding gangs’ activity. They also seek to strategically feed into the present and future work of the Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) – a Council-led piece of work around bringing key partners and the community together to tackle the growing levels of violence affecting the borough.

The Committee recognises the difficulties associated with tackling violent crime in Waltham Forest, particularly against a backdrop of cuts to key community safety services. However, it acknowledges the importance of bringing all key partners together to reduce violent crime from a public health approach in a collaborative and holistic way. This is why the Committee supports the work of the VRP, puts forward steps to strengthen its pledges and proposes to review its next steps in the coming year.

We would like to thank the officers who supported the review throughout the year with invaluable contributions and immense dedication. We would also like to extend our thank you to the Metropolitan Police for its attendance and input over the last year.

Summary of recommendations

The Committee recommends:

Recommendation 1: That services develop an action plan on how they will identify girls at risk of criminal exploitation and support them as a priority.
Recommendation 2: That services demonstrate how attendance and exclusion data can be used to identify those at risk of criminal exploitation and support them.

Recommendation 3: That the Council considers additional investment in pastoral services across schools focussed on reducing violence and improving life chances.

Recommendation 4: That Cabinet review the Council’s Child Poverty Strategy and how it can support a public health approach to reducing violent crime.

Recommendation 5: That services report back on the work undertaken with the Young Advisors to make stop and search more evidence based in the borough.

Background

The Communities Scrutiny Committee selected the public health approach to violent crime as its themed review for 2018/2019, continuing work it began in 2017/18. Over the municipal year, it received information on the defining elements of the approach, the Council’s role in implementation and the work being done to take this approach forward as a way to tackle serious crime in the borough.

A public health approach to reducing violent crime seeks to identify and address the risk factors associated with violence. This can be done by a broad range of initiatives, and would normally see partners coordinating a number of interventions in respect to:

- Early life experiences (including domestic abuse)
- Peer relationships and gangs
- Deprivation and social inequality
- Alcohol and drugs
- Cultural and social norms
- Disability
- Adult psychiatric disorders, childhood conduct disorder and violence

Violent crime in the Borough:

For the financial year 2016/2017, Waltham Forest borough operational command unit reported 7,392 crimes recorded as violence against the person. For 2017/2018, this rose to 7,425.¹ The rate of violent offences in Waltham Forest in 2017/18 was 20th highest out of 32 London Boroughs. Domestic abuse accounts for around one-third of all violent offences. 74% of violent crime suspects were men. Similar proportions of suspects are Afro Caribbean and White European (31-32%).

¹ https://www.met.police.uk/stats-and-data/year-end-crime-statistics/
Methodology

Initial scoping for this themed review was carried out over summer 2018. On the 27th June 2018, the Communities Scrutiny Committee reviewed the scoping document, and agreed the public health approach to violence as its themed review over 2018/2019.

The Committee used its meetings from October 2018 to March 2019 to understand the approach’s key elements, how it fits within the Council’s strategies and programmes and the work being carried out to implement this approach in the borough. These included:

16 October 2018

Stella Bailey, Senior Public Health Strategist, presented a report on the definition of a public health approach to violence reduction and prevention. It was noted that the violence referred to in this report was mostly interpersonal, which included gang and youth violence. It was noted that a public health approach to violence is constituted by four steps: defining and monitoring the problem; identifying risk and protective factors; developing and testing prevention strategies; and ensuring widespread adoption.

5 December 2018

Alastair Macorkindale, Group Manager (Strategic) of Community Safety, presented a report on the Council’s role in a public health approach to violence. This report outlined the wider political context of the public health approach to violence and emphasised the wide-ranging impact of violence on victims, families, witnesses and communities. The report summarised the multi-faceted character of the public health approach, namely how it involves those at risk of violence, places additional controls around them, seeks to treat them, builds community resilience, treats victims of violence and reduces the opportunities for violence.

4 March 2019

The Group Manager of Community Safety provided the Committee with an overview of the Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP). The Committee was briefed on the goal of the VRP – that of strengthening the Council’s existing public health approach to violence by developing closer and stronger relationships with key stakeholders.
and the wider community. The Committee received additional information on the partnership’s work to date and its next steps.

**Key findings**

The present review into a public health approach to violence has focused primarily on interpersonal forms of violence, namely gang and youth violence. The latter has risen sharply in London in the past year, against a backdrop of a 51.49% increase in murder offences and a 25.09% increase in the possession of offensive weapons in the city in 2017/18\(^6\). This has resulted in the creation of the Serious Violence Strategy\(^7\) in April 2018 and the setup of the Greater London Assembly (GLA) Violence Reduction Unit, which takes a public health approach to tackling violence, thereby seeing it as a “preventable consequence of a range of factors, such as adverse early-life experiences, or harmful social or community experiences and influences”\(^8\).

There has been a simultaneous upsurge in serious violence in Waltham Forest between 2016 and 2018. This has affected young people in particular – in 2017-18 the rate for serious youth violence leading to injury was 9.9 per thousand of the population\(^9\). The Council has sought to better understand and monitor the violence resulting from gang activity by commissioning reports in 2007 and 2017 from the London South Bank University on the nature of gangs in the borough. The 2017 *Postcodes to Profit* report\(^10\) identified a number of risk factors including the changing nature of gangs’ activity, the involvement of young women and the rise in the fear of violence in the borough. Following the publication of both Gangs reports, Waltham Forest has introduced new interventions – including a new gangs programme –, continued employing successful ones and brought out new approaches – such as the Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP). The new VRP is designed to strengthen the Council’s existing public health approach to violence by developing closer and stronger relationships with key stakeholders and the wider community. These have been underlined by the Think Family 2020 framework and the Creating Futures strategy and strengthened by the Metropolitan Police’s work to address gang and youth violence.

The Committee took a particular interest in the extent to which girls and young women are involved in gang activity in the borough, its causes and how this

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involvement may affect them in specific ways. According to the Metropolitan Police, 73 Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) concerns – including number of reports and of children at risk of exploitation – identified in the borough over the last year were girls. The Committee heard from witnesses on the limited yet increasing role of girls and young women within gangs and on their participation in gang related criminal behaviour, such as carrying or hiding illegal goods, including guns or drugs. Some of the risk factors for the recruitment of girls and young women by gangs include deprivation, a lack of opportunities, abusive backgrounds and the search for a sense of power or belonging. The Committee was informed of the work carried out by the Community Safety team in this field and, in particular, of a specialised programme in seven secondary schools in the borough which will be rolled out over the next two years.

The Postcodes to Profit report emphasised the fact that gangs recruit girls and young women because they are less likely to attract the authorities’ attention. This means they are less likely to be captured in statistics and remain mostly invisible to statutory services. The Committee identified this invisibility cycle as being of particular concern as it may encourage the continued recruitment and exploitation of girls and young women, deter prevention and limit our understanding of the scale of the problem. A central part of a public health approach to violence is that of defining and monitoring the problem so as to be able to identify risk and protective factors. The Committee therefore recommends:

**Recommendation 1:** That services develop an action plan on how they will identify girls at risk of criminal exploitation and support them as a priority;

The Committee recognises the importance of understanding the underlying causes of violence, its indicators and the risk factors experienced by certain groups, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation as result of involvement in gang activity. Being persistently absent from school, excluded from mainstream education and attending a Pupil Referral Unit, in particular, are possible indicators of gang involvement. These indicators are widely recognised by the Home Office, the Youth Justice Legal Centre, Barnardo’s and the All-Parliamentary Party Group on Knife Crime as being important to determine the level of risk of both victimisation and perpetration of serious violence, knife crime, criminal exploitation and gang involvement.

A recent report from the Children’s Commissioner for England\(^\text{11}\) notes that children in gangs are 37% more likely to be missing/absent from school than other young offenders. It also noted that 740,000 children had been persistently absent from school in England over 2018. In Waltham Forest, there has been a rise in the rate of persistent absence (PA), with 4,646 pupils being PA in 2017/18 in comparison to

4,436 pupils in 2016/17. There has been a more acute increase in the number of permanent exclusions with provisional data indicating a total number of 27 permanent exclusions in 2017/18, which represents a 42% increase from 16/17\(^\text{12}\).

The Committee recognises the work carried out by the Council to tackle this issue, namely through the Behaviour Strategy and the Fair Access Panel. It nevertheless recommends that the above risk factors are used strategically to improve our prevention approach:

**Recommendation 2**: That services demonstrate how attendance and exclusion data can be used to identify those at risk of criminal exploitation and support them.

The Committee acknowledges the vital role of schools in supporting young people at risk of gang involvement, or involvement in violence. It identifies, as concluded by the *Postcodes to Profit* report, that growing up in a domestically abused household and experiencing a lack of connections, of support and abandonment are risk factors which make young children particularly vulnerable to gang membership. Having adequate accompaniment and support available within a school setting is central to prevent this and reduce the risk of exploitation. Nevertheless, against a backdrop of school funding cuts, this support, and particularly that offered by pastoral services, cannot always be guaranteed. This has been noted in a recent report published by the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board on vulnerable adolescents: "Members representing schools spoke about not having enough resources to provide adequate pastoral support to a growing number of children who display behavioural problems, or who have special educational needs"\(^\text{13}\).

The Committee was informed that discussions were being held with partners as part of the Violence Reduction Partnership to determine how those exposed to risk factors can be best supported within school settings and that a future community focused mentoring scheme was being developed. The Committee also received information regarding potential additional investment proposed by the Council in the areas of early help and community resilience building. This would be used to fund the ‘Botvin Life Skills Training’ programme – an evidence-based approach to violence prevention which would focus primarily on primary school children in the borough.

The Committee acknowledges and welcomes the work carried out as part of the Violence Reduction Partnership to strengthen the support offered at schools, the proposed additional funding and the implementation of evidence-based prevention programmes. The Committee is of the view this work could be strengthened by


ensuring that pastoral services are offered consistently across the schools in the borough, and that this support is provided to both primary school and secondary school children and young people. It therefore recommends:

**Recommendation 3:** That the Council considers additional investment in pastoral services across schools focussed on reducing violence and improving life chances;

Poverty is a key social driver for young people to join gangs. As concluded in the *Postcodes to Profit report*, most participants saw gang membership as a quick way to raise income, which was central to many of the participants interviewed. The report also notes that if the young person’s family is experiencing considerable poverty and they are able to contribute financially, this can create an additional barrier in challenging or reporting this behaviour.

The Committees is of the view that tackling poverty, especially child poverty, is vital to prevent children and young people’s involvement in gangs and youth violence. In 2009, the Council designed its Child Poverty Strategy 2009-2020\(^{14}\). Through it, it seeks to support the delivery of a number of strategies intended to improve children and young people’s health, economic wellbeing and employability and support particularly hard to reach groups. The Committee supports the Council’s actions and strategies in the field of child poverty. It feels this could be enhanced to reflect the recent upsurge in youth, serious and knife crime, as well as the Council’s improved understanding of complex gang activity and county lines exploitation. In addition to this, the Child Poverty Strategy should be further strengthened through coordinated action with new programmes and approaches in the Council, including the Violence Reduction Partnership and the Life Chances programme. The Committee therefore recommends:

**Recommendation 4:** That Cabinet review the Council’s Child Poverty Strategy and how it can support a public health approach to reducing violent crime;

As stated throughout the report, the public health approach to violence requires an accurate identification of risk and protective factors and the prioritisation of evidence-based approaches. Stop and search – a power held by the police intended to curtail violence at its source – similarly relies upon an accurate identification of possible suspects and of evidence-based tactics.

According to the Metropolitan Police, almost 1 in 3 of all searches result in the officer’s suspicion being confirmed and an illegal object found or a relevant crime detected. Nevertheless, issues have been raised regarding the relation between stop and search and age, gender and race. One of such issues was identified in the

Postcodes to Profit report: “concern has been expressed that current national stop and search practices are incentivising women and girls to engage in criminal behaviour, for example the majority of police officers are men and are therefore unable to search women and girls”.¹⁵

The Committee was informed that Young Advisors are involved in activities intended to make stop and search more evidence based, effective and tailored in Waltham Forest. The Committees welcomes this initiative, which is in line with a public health approach and prioritises young people’s views, and recommends:

**Recommendation 5:** That services report back on the work undertaken with the Young Advisors to make stop and search more evidence based in the borough;

**Conclusion**

The findings and recommendations contained within this report are intended to build upon the work carried out to date by the Council, in collaboration with partners, including the police, to tackle violence and to implement a public health approach in the borough. It focuses on the identification and strategic use of risk factors to strengthen prevention initiatives, on the role of schools and pastoral services in preventing gang involvement and violence, on the role of the Council in tackling child poverty and the role of the police in ensuring their approaches to violence prevention are evidence-based. Through its 5 formal recommendations, the Committee has sought to define possible next steps for the Council and its partners, which seek to complement the collaborative and excellent approaches and programmes already in place, including the Violence Reduction Partnership.