



Home Office

Ending Gang and Youth Violence Community Engagement

Introduction

This document is aimed at assisting local areas to design effective community engagement strategies in relation to gang and youth violence. It captures the lessons learned from the Ending Gang and Youth Violence peer reviews in relation to community engagement and has been written in consultation with peer reviewers with experience in community engagement.¹

The Ending Gang and Youth Violence report published in November 2011 recognised the importance of engaging communities, and this was one of the elements addressed during the peer review process.

There is no universal definition of 'community engagement', a term used to refer to a wide range of methods and initiatives that focus on supporting and encouraging communities to address and solve the challenges they face. It is generally agreed that community engagement strategies include partnership building and networking, community mobilisation and community coalition building, which are terms that have been used interchangeably. For the purposes of this document we will use the convention adopted by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE).²

Community engagement – *an umbrella term encompassing a continuum of approaches to engaging communities of place and/or interest in activities aimed at improving community safety.*

Feedback from peer reviews shows that community engagement in the context of gang and youth violence requires an acceptance that universal approaches to engaging the community need to be balanced with targeted interventions and support which address the needs of specific groups. This includes active and former gang members, young people involved in violence, their close associates, and those who are in prison or a youth offender institution. But equally important, community engagement strategies should include members of the wider community, those who are most at risk of violence both as victims and perpetrators, and victims and local people already affected by the violence. Whilst interventions should be directed to the worst offenders – gang members and young people in violent lifestyles – working with the whole of the community creates the right environment in which violence can be stopped and safety maintained in the long term.

Ending youth violence requires an end-to-end approach, from prevention to rehabilitation, which is only possible through collaboration between statutory and non-statutory partners, local residents, community, faith and youth groups, and public agencies and businesses.

1 The peer review has formed a key part of the support offered to local areas. The review involved a team of experts working closely with areas to identify strengths in their approach to tackling gangs and youth violence, and areas for improvement.

2 Community Engagement For Health Improvement: Questions Of Definition, Outcomes And Evaluation A Background Paper Prepared For Nice By Professor Jennie Popay March 1st 2006

Basic principles

Most agencies attempt to engage their communities on a broad range of issues, with differing levels of success. Many agencies will have examples of exercises to engage the community which were only successful in engaging a small group of people, usually the most vocal members. However, evidence shows that it is possible to expand the minority that does engage if communities are asked to take part in defining the problem, **and finding the solution.**

There are a wide range of community engagement techniques and methodologies that can be used, but this is outside the scope of this practical guide.

Which method to choose will depend on the objective to be achieved, what level of engagement is appropriate in order to achieve that objective, what groups in the community are key players to achieving the objective, level of resources, desired outcomes, etc. Whatever method or technique is used, an effective community engagement process is usually designed along the following lines:

- **Clearly scoped** – the emphasis should be on action, framing the issues in a way that is conducive to finding solutions: why are we engaging; what are we trying to achieve; what is on the table; and, equally important, what is not.
- **Connected to the decision-making** – the process is meant to achieve an outcome, otherwise there is the risk that those involved could become frustrated.
- **Inclusive** – all people should have access to the information they need to participate.
- **Involve deliberation** – people should be given the chance to think things through and weigh up alternatives.
- **Build relationships** – getting to know people and providing opportunities for everyone to appreciate each other's viewpoints and perspectives.
- **Influential** – people will disengage if there is no evidence that their input influences the outcomes.
- **Provide feedback** – people should be informed of how their contribution has made a difference.
- **Build trust** – a good community engagement strategy will result in people having confidence in their local council and community partnerships.

Community engagement in the context of ending gang and youth violence

Communities affected by violence can be difficult to engage. Factors such as acceptance that violence is the norm or cannot be prevented, fear of reprisals, a “no grass” culture and lack of trust that reporting violence will lead to action are barriers that need to be addressed. It is difficult to create a strong and cohesive community where it doesn’t exist, but statutory agencies such as councils and the police, and community safety partnerships can act as catalysts for change. Communities need channels to engage and statutory agencies are well placed to create the infrastructure needed, e.g. neighbourhood councils, steering groups, committees, policy action teams, etc.

There is no “one size fits all” solution but feedback from the peer reviews suggests a number of community engagement general principles that seem to work in relation to gangs and youth violence:

- **Strong leadership** – Commitment to community engagement from community safety partnership leaders and chief executives is crucial. A community engagement champion at director or chief executive level will help to ensure that community engagement is a priority for the agency.
- **Make use of existing resources. Do not duplicate work** – Too often engagement in relation to ending gang and youth violence takes place outside wider engagement work that the council, police and other statutory partners and agencies are already undertaking in relation to other policy areas. Resources are limited and it makes sense to combine engagement activity.
- **Make optimum use of statutory partners’ existing resources** – Tap into current resources using a collaborative approach. Ending gang and youth violence involves collaboration across housing, education, social care, community living, families, and other services within a local authority as much as collaboration with other statutory (and non-statutory) partners.
- **Be vigilant of a perception that violence is normal or that it cannot be tackled** – Cultural and social norms, including within statutory agencies, that accept violence or see it as unavoidable must be challenged.
- **Involve the community in the decisions that affect them** – Move away from a “research/consultation” mentality and have a genuine dialogue with the community, taking on board their views of what initiatives and programmes are needed and how they should be delivered. Encourage the community to be part of delivering the solution.
- **Engage a wide range of communities and individuals** – Strive to include those who are less vocal or communities perceived as “impenetrable”.
- **Make use of expertise, programmes and service providers already available to your organisation** – Community engagement in relation to ending gang and youth violence is likely to be more effective if it is integrated into existing wider engagement work.
- **Involve businesses, faith groups, civil society organisations, and private citizens** – The community is wider than voluntary and community sector.

- **Take every opportunity to make the Ending Gang and Youth Violence agenda widely known** – This will make it easier to share common goals, common purpose, and agree effective actions across agencies and communities.
- **Listen to young people** – in particular the high risk individuals who are involved in gangs and youth violence and those who are vulnerable to involvement. When engaging these individuals regard should be had to their safety as engaging in itself can put them at risk.
- **Create multiple opportunities for community members to get involved** – People are more likely to engage if there are a wide range of initiatives and projects to be involved in.
- **Commitment and patience** – Ending gang and youth violence is a long term commitment. Similarly, community engagement and community development takes time. Be patient.

Practical lessons from the peer reviews

There are no easy solutions and each community is different but the peer review process highlighted a number of initiatives and approaches that appear to work:

- **Develop the capacity of local grassroots groups, the faith sector, active residents and ex-gang members to take responsibility for local solutions to address gang and youth violence.**

Efforts should be made to make bidding processes accessible to small grassroots groups. This encourages local talent and contributes to the whole of the community being reached. To this end, some areas are supporting collective bid writing and, crucially, collective delivery of projects and encouraging smaller organisations to partner with larger ones who have more capacity and experience in managing the process surrounding bid writing, evaluation and monitoring.

When engaging with local grassroots groups do so on a regular basis and ensure that specific outcomes are agreed and that every group and individual understands the part they play in the solution. Empower those groups and individuals by listening and trialling solutions they may suggest.

Do a mapping exercise of all grassroots groups, local community groups and voluntary sector organisations operating in the community and bring them together to share good practice and provide support. This would facilitate strong relationship building.

CASE STUDY

Croydon has established a local network of “community connectors”, a group of well respected community members who subscribe to creating safer communities and building good relationships.

During the riots in August 2011 incidents were particularly concentrated in a few wards of West Croydon. The wards in this area are characterised by high levels of deprivation. There was a particular need to build trust, confidence and resilience in these areas as well as better networks among a diverse community.

In autumn 2012, Croydon Council on behalf of local partners commissioned Nurture Development and Croydon Voluntary Action, working with the Asian Resource Centre Croydon and Ginger Bread Corner, to deliver a project aimed at creating new community connections in the Croydon wards of Broad Green, Selhurst and Thornton Heath.

The project aimed to harness the individual and community assets to strengthen communities and families in the three wards, utilising Asset Based Community Development principles and practice. An asset based approach builds on the skills, knowledge and potential within the community and its members. It starts by asking questions about, and reflecting on, what is already present: what makes this a good place to live? What does the community do to improve things around here? What do community members do for each other? What helps us feel independent and in control? What helps us feel connected and socially useful?

The project started by identifying ‘Community Connectors’ – well connected people in their community who talked to people to find out what they cared about and were willing to do something about the issue; what would help them to act on it; what support could be offered.

The next stage was to mobilise the assets of the whole community, promote participation in social networks and strengthen social connectedness to develop projects or initiatives that would strengthen the community, with access to small pots of matched funding.

Early indications are that there have been good levels of participation in the project across different communities in particular among communities that are traditionally under-represented. To date, more than 60 community projects have emerged from the new connections made, including ideas for projects working with local young people, homeless people and the elderly.

- **Identify a catalyst for action** – For instance, a particularly violent crime can bring together people who are willing to engage **and take action**. It is crucial to engage the right people, including those seldom heard: young people vulnerable to gangs, ex-gang members, victims, siblings and families.

CASE STUDY

The Birmingham Reducing Gang Violence Strategy is a culmination of intensive partnership work commenced in January 2003, following the New Year's Eve shooting and murders of two young women. It was created to take strategic ownership of Birmingham's urban street gangs issue and to provide a response to it, working in partnership for the benefit of our communities.

Communities are integral to addressing the threats from gang violence by providing local community perspective; however they will only engage with police and partners if they experience an open, fair and transparent relationship. The Birmingham Reducing Gang Violence Strategy has successfully enabled this by involving community representatives in both its Tactical Group and Executive Board. They are key stakeholders and help agencies understand the problem better by informing them about current situations and tensions. Their co-operation is vital. They influence the culture and well being of a community and are the barometer of the feelings within the community. They provide independent advice and critical guidance on the development, management and deployment of partnership resources to interventions.

The Birmingham Reducing Gang Violence community representatives participated in the commissioning process for gang and youth violence work by assisting in developing the specifications and scoring frameworks for the interventions selected. Furthermore they formed part of the commissioning panel overseeing the tendering process, marking and scoring of submitted applications and ultimately decision making decisions regarding the award of contracts.

- **Encourage communities to report crime and challenge and change the “no grass” culture** - Communities and vulnerable individuals should be encouraged to stand up against crime and criminals. Fear of retaliation and intimidation is sometimes an obstacle to report crime. Fear of being called a “snitch” and a “no grass” culture can also present a significant barrier to reporting crime. There are a number of independent groups that can help.

Crimestoppers work with community safety partnerships and local authorities across the whole of the United Kingdom to help communities fight crime. They have been operating for the last 25 years and have a proven record of enabling vulnerable individuals and communities to stand up against crime. The charity has also launched “Fearless” a website aimed at young people to encourage them to report crime.

CASE STUDY

Safer Knowsley Partnership has set up a community messaging system to improve the relationship between the local community and the partnership, and tackle gangs and youth violence. The messaging system links the council's Safer Partnership to the community by alerting the public with up-to-date relevant and timely information about local crime. This mode of communication is capable of reaching thousands of families through email text or voice messages and allows the community to reply confidentially about information on local crime.

- **Include local residents in statutory agencies' partnerships** – Involving local residents in the decisions that affect them is an effective way of engaging communities. Providing different levels of engagement and including citizens in the delivery of the solutions of the problems that affect them is key to expanding the number of residents that do engage.

CASE STUDY

Waltham Forest's "A Better Way Partnership Board" is a community group whose members include residents with professional and social expertise. The partnership was set up to make a positive and constructive contribution to the programme to reduce gang-related crime and anti-social behaviour.

The Board has formal and open lines of discussion with the Council, the Metropolitan Police Service and central government, plus other well established bodies and projects in Waltham Forest and other areas. It is the responsibility of the Board to ensure that membership reflects the areas/wards where the programme is being implemented.

The Board has now over 30 dedicated members which comprises of individuals who have set up their own businesses successfully, public sector experts and community figures whose grassroots activity has made them trusted figures to some of the borough's most disenfranchised young people. It is chaired by a local resident. Decisions at the Board are taken on the basis of a simple majority.

The group is able to act on behalf of communities regarding incidents and ongoing issues in Waltham Forest.

CASE STUDY

Multi-Agency Geographical Panels in Islington have played a crucial role in strengthening relationships between the community and statutory partners using a range of tools such as community events, environmental visual audits, and gang call-ins.

The groups consist of people from across the borough who work together to tackle local crime. Anybody who wants to help tackle anti-social behaviour in their local area can get involved including residents, traders, voluntary organisations and community groups. Each panel has core members from Islington Council and other local agencies including registered social landlords, police and schools. Ward councillors sit on each panel to represent the local community.

Each panel has a budget to spend on projects that benefit the area they cover. The panel members discuss ways to solving a problem and produce an action plan. Usually several agencies will work together to solve one problem with different aspects being tackled by different agencies.

- **Set up processes to listen to young people, in particular, those involved in gangs and youth violence.**

Some areas have established a young people's forum to engage those involved on youth and gang violence. The forum takes a lead in the research, design and delivery of interventions from a young adult's perspective. Young people should have an input into the interventions designed for them and should be asked to help to deliver them.

CASE STUDY

Waltham Forest Youth Independent Advisory Group is a partnership between young people, the council, the police and the community safety board, involving young people interested in crime and community safety issues. Some members are ex-offenders, others are victims of crime in areas where youth violence is part of their lives.

Members are trained in the principles of conflict theory, anger management and peer training. The Youth Offending Team trains young people on their caseload on tips and tools of how to resolve conflict. These courses last six weeks and are run three times a year. Participants feel that young trainers can relate to them, particularly those who may have been under the supervision of the Youth Offending Team themselves in the past. At the end of the six week programme the participants are asked if they would like to join the Youth Independent Advisory Group. This is a positive activity that can serve as part of their rehabilitation. In 2012 the group won a national award for 'Peer Trainers of the Year' from LEAP Confronting Conflict, an organisation which provides conflict resolution training to young people and the adults that work with them.

The group advises Waltham Forest police, the council and strategic boards, giving a youth perspective. It also advises the Community Safety Board, the Stop and Search Board, the Gang Prevention Programme, the Community Safety Team, the Troubled Families Unit, the Youth Offender Service and the A Better Way Partnership.

- **Set up processes processes to listen to the parents, wider family and social networks of those affected by, involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in gang violence.**

CASE STUDY

Greater Manchester Probation Trust set up Partners of Prisoners, a family forum for family members and partners of those affected by gang and youth violence.

The Partners of Prisoners Family workers identified gang members who received an Intensive Alternative to Custody Order and contacted their family members as part of the induction process on receiving the Order. This unique order was made for offenders who have committed an offence which carries a jail sentence of less than 12 months.

The team also identified those young people whose family members had concerns about their peer group, locality or other family members that may put them at risk of gang involvement or youth violence.

The family workers then set up forums which are attended by family members, and professionals such as educational staff, police, offender managers etc, so families can feel better informed and equipped to support the offender.

As a result of this work family members have begun to develop and build up their own support network, recognising that others are affected by and having similar issues to them.

- **Establish mentoring programmes which can provide community-based one-to-one support and intervention through outreach activities.**

Mentoring has good evidence of success when applied appropriately. More frequent regular contact, longer contacts, and combining with other supportive interventions appear to make mentoring more effective. However, research³ suggests that caution should be taken when implementing mentoring programmes. Poorly implemented mentoring programmes (for example, unstructured mentoring, or with unmotivated or otherwise unsuitable mentors) can make things worse.

CASE STUDY

The Somali Ealing Youth Project works with, and provides mentoring for, young Somalis who are involved in gang culture and youth violence, or are vulnerable to gang culture.

The council uses young educated Somalis as outreach youth workers, as they have in-depth knowledge of the cultural and social background of the Somali community. This cultural awareness and affinity gives the outreach youth workers the opportunity to easily befriend and relate to young people in their one-to-one mentoring sessions.

The project also engaged with parents who, for the most part, were unaware of the contemporary social and political context in the United Kingdom. They find that this lack of awareness about the British way of life meant that most parents struggled to give practical advice to their children.

The project worked with Somali parents to raise awareness of gang culture and youth violence and the factors that contribute to these social problems. Fifty Somali parents attended the courses. Most of the sessions were interactive and this gave parents the opportunity to talk and discuss important social issues of relevance to the community. The parents stated that the discussion on gangs and crime-related issues helped them to de-stigmatise talking about those issues in public and have helped them to create community forums where such issues are openly addressed and discussed.

- **Encourage programmes and initiatives that provide local role models to young people**, such as successful local business people from similar backgrounds, young sports/Olympics people who have grown up in the area and similar initiatives capable of acting as hooks for young people. Some areas, for example, are setting up community based programmes delivered by the Fire Service. This includes Fire Awareness Child Education, quad bikes and inflatable fire fit courses and cage soccer as the hook for engaging with young people, parents and families.

3 Jolliffe, D. and Farrington, D. P. (2008) *The Influence of Mentoring on Reoffending*. Stockholm: National Council for Crime Prevention; DuBois, D. L., Holloway, B. E., Valentine, J. C. and Cooper, H. (2002) 'Effectiveness of Mentoring Programs for Youth: a meta-analytical review', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 30 (2), pp 157–197; Jekielek, S. M., Moore, K. A., Hair, E. C. and Scarupa, H. J. (2002) *Mentoring: A promising strategy for youth development*. Washington DC: Child Trends.

CASE STUDY

Camden police works with Evolution Cycles, a local business, to educate and give skills and pride to vulnerable and hard to reach young people in the borough.

Bicycles under the value of £50 in police possession, where an owner cannot be located, are sent to Evolution Cycles for them to be refurbished by young people to a standard to sell. This way the young people gain qualification and at the same time experience a work environment.

- **Encourage and pilot new ideas or ideas that have worked somewhere else.**

Treating violence as a public health issue, for example, is a relatively new approach in the UK. The Department of Health report “Protecting people. Promoting health. A public health approach to violence prevention in England” outlines the important role that those with a role in health policy can play to facilitate violence prevention.⁴

Violence causes around 35,000 emergency hospital admissions and over 300,000 emergency department attendances in England each year. In 2010/11, there were 13,000 emergency hospital admissions for assault among 13-24 year olds. Violence is a major public health issue that affects millions of people in England each year. Preventing violence must be seen as a priority for public health, health care and multi-sectoral working in England.

CASE STUDY

Youth workers from Redthread, a charity specialising in youth work, healthcare and education, have been embedded in King’s College Hospital’s Accident and Emergency department and trauma centre since 2006, as part of the King’s Youth Violence Project. The hospital serves a number of boroughs, including Southwark, Lambeth and Lewisham.

Redthread work closely with Accident and Emergency staff to try and disrupt the cycle of violence that brings hundreds of young people to the hospital each year. The youth workers seek to intervene during the ‘teachable moment’ period when a young person is in hospital, to persuade them to move away from gang and youth violence and encourage them to access local support services when s/he is discharged.

Redthread has formed a strong partnership with the Accident and Emergency team and have become an integral part of the hospital’s child safeguarding multidisciplinary team, offering their expertise and services to help the team to fulfil its aim to ‘reduce teen deaths and serious woundings’ by identifying and reaching out to those who are most vulnerable.

⁴ “Protecting people. Promoting health. A public health approach to violence prevention in England. Department of Health.”.

- **Evaluate all programmes and projects.**

Interventions should always be evaluated. If they have been implemented elsewhere, there should be clear and independent evidence of effectiveness before funds are allocated. Training some staff in evaluation techniques could be cost effective. Alternatively, places of higher education are often keen for social studies research students to produce a final year dissertation based upon real life interventions.

- **Bring parents into the Ending Gang and Youth Violence agenda** – Exploit opportunities for engagement through schools, community groups and community activists. Ensure a clear communication or consultation strategy where parents feel they can be heard but also participate and share information and experience.
- **Consider using a “community brokerage” approach to engage a wider sector of the community** and enable the community to identify and develop the local strategies that work for them. This is, using community organisations to work with appropriate community stakeholders and consult with local people, helping to broker relationships. For example it might be difficult for statutory agencies to directly work in partnership with local people with low trust and confidence in their services and therefore working through community organisations to broker these relationships could facilitate this partnership work.
- **Encourage good work where it already exists.** Often local groups could benefit from some training, assistance with meetings or forums, and making available a venue.

