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Youth Safety Strategy

Evaluation

James Alexander and John Pitts

April 2024

Executive Summary

Dr James Alexander from London Metropolitan University and Professor John Pitts from Bedfordshire University were commissioned to evaluate the effectiveness of Islington Council's current Youth Safety Strategy (2020-2025).

The review focused on understanding how residents and young people affected by violence felt about how safe young people were in the borough as well as considering the views of practitioners regarding the progress towards achieving the strategy's objectives which include:

- Protecting children and young people from violence, abuse and exploitation
- Fostering stronger and safer communities
- Building resilience among children and young people

Within the strategy, the local authority will be successful if:

- There is an increase in educational achievement
- A reduction in suspensions and exclusions
- Disproportionality within the youth justice system and education system is reduced
- More young people are in employment education or training
- There are reduced waiting times for young people to access mental health support
- Fewer young people are offending
- Less young people are at risk of exploitation

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The current strategy was developed at the start of the COVID lockdowns and although this coincided with a reduction in youth violence, there were concerns that the longer term impacts on children's and adults' mental health may increase the demand for already stretched resources. These fears were well founded and post COVID, practitioners have found not only do more young people and their families require support, but their needs were more complex. This situation has been further compounded by the cost of living crisis that has increased the financial strain on households.

The local authority, which is working towards becoming a child friendly borough, has responded to the need in the borough by heavily investing in youth provision and there is a strong sense of collaboration and partnership between different council departments and their partners. The past few years have seen sustained reductions in youth offending, reoffending and permanent exclusions. This progress has been underpinned by a public health model for preventing violence by addressing the underlying risk factors associated with youth criminality.

The iTIPS programme that supports teachers and youth workers in identifying what may be behind a young person's problematic behaviour and knowing how to respond is a proactive example of an intervention that seeks to address the actions of young people by supporting rather than simply sanctioning them.

Embedding specialists such as psychologists and services that support those at risk of exploitation into the Youth Justice Service, Targeted Youth Support and the Islington Collaboration Network (the gang intervention service) is allowing young people to access support that they would not otherwise be able to. The partnership between Bright Start and CAMHS based in the borough's family hubs is helping to identify children who may be neurodivergent earlier, ensuring that they and their families access support with fewer delays.

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Although there is development in establishing a public health approach to youth safety and a clear commitment to an early intervention model for supporting young people, the progress feels vulnerable in some areas.

Central government policy and the current economic climate resulting in funding constraints ean that it will be a struggle to maintain current levels of investment. Some providers are expecting to become more targeted in the near future, while others are expecting demand for services to exceed their capacity. Potential reductions in the support offered are likely to leave young people more vulnerable to exposure to violence and exploitation.

Although school exclusions are down, so is attendance, when compared to pre COVID levels and the suspension rate in both primary and secondary schools has risen. Given the link between school engagement and youth violence and exploitation, this situation could result in more young people at risk of being groomed into county lines or becoming exposed to violence.

There is also a danger that cuts in services will lead to an additional reliance on enforcement in hotspot areas, which, due to the demography of these neighbourhoods, could lead to increased overrepresentation of young people from Black and other minoritised backgrounds within the youth justice system.

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Despite progress being made in ensuring young people at most risk of exposure to violence can access the support they need, 2023 saw four young people murdered through knife crime in the borough. The risk of criminal exploitation remains with the number of young people going missing and of missing incidents remaining high. Young people interviewed for the evaluation spoke of needing to be vigilant as soon as they left their homes and expressed a sense of isolation and not being able to trust people with their concerns. It was clear that it is the norm for young people to not feel safe as they travel around the borough and many of their decisions are based around navigating the risks they face.

As a result, even though there has been significant progress made to ensure all young men and women, including members of the LGBTQ+ community feel safe, young people still feel at risk in the borough. Although the safety of young men remains a concern it is also apparent that more young women are increasingly at risk of experiencing violence. The fear and isolation that lots young people feel in their everyday lives is a major reason why many, particularly young men, carry weapons and needs to be a key focus going forward.

> **"Young people interviewed for the evaluation spoke of needing to be vigilant as soon as they left their homes and expressed a sense of isolation and not being able to trust people with their concerns."**

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In considering the next steps, other youth safety initiatives have found that a well resourced and coordinated multi-agency response that includes violence suppression tactics, alongside bottom up community led interventions focusing on safeguarding those at risk and supporting the personal development of gang members, have led to sustained reductions in youth violence. The work to become a child friendly borough is to be commended and the recommendations in this report seek to build upon this. The evaluation recommends that the council and its partners consider how they can work together to develop a community led geographically based response that will prioritise making young people feel safe and reduce the immediate threat of violence. Programmes to tackle youth violence are more successful if residents are empowered to be involved in the planning and delivery of these interventions.

Throughout the evaluation, the good work that is being done across the borough was evident, it is vital that the council builds on this to ensure that it continues to improve the safety of young people growing up in Islington.

Everyone spoken to as part of this evaluation's commitment to improving youth safety was clearly evident throughout the evaluation. Within the borough, there is a culture of innovation that prioritises identifying data led solutions that aim to ensure young people and their families can access the support they need as quickly as possible. To aid with the council's ambitions to address youth violence and ensure that young people growing up in the borough are safe, the following are put forward as recommendations.

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Introduction

Introduction

The current social and economic context is very different from when Islington Council developed its youth safety strategy. In 2020, the country was in the midst of a series of COVID-19 lockdowns, and although these contributed to a 25% reduction in youth violence locally, the lasting impact on people's mental health and wider social interactions was uncertain. As the nation emerged from the Covid restrictions, individuals, households and organisations, including local authorities have found their finances significantly impacted by the cost of living crisis. This period has coincided with a gradual rise in youth violence, at a time when the local authority has channelled significant resources into the delivery of their current Youth Safety Strategy.

This evaluation was requested through Islington's Youth Justice Services Management Board and comes at a time when five young people have been murdered through knife crime in the borough in just over a year, one young person died as a result of a police chase and another committed suicide. There are therefore concerns that although significant effort has been put into making young people safer in Islington, young people are still at considerable risk of experiencing serious youth violence. It was clear in speaking to young people as part of this evaluation that many are living in fear of what might happen to them as they move around the borough. It was commonplace for a young person to know someone who had been attacked and there was very little belief among those who contributed to the evaluation, that enough was being done to address their concerns. How to address young people's lack of a sense of safety is therefore a key focus for this evaluation.

The report is divided into eight sections. The main body of the evaluation commences by considering the local context, young people's views on their safety and the wider factors that shaped the current strategy in section three. In 2020, a large percentage of children in Islington were growing up in poverty, there were longstanding gang and county lines issues in the borough. Those supported by Islington's Youth Justice Service were disproportionately likely to be Not Engaged in Education, Training or Employment (NEET), have a history of exclusion and have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). There were also increasing concerns about young people's mental health. At the same time the council was gaining a better understanding of the extent of the violence that young women and girls were experiencing and were keen to address the fact that particular groups of young people were disproportionately impacted by risk factors associated with youth violence.

Section four summarises the council's current youth safety strategy, which sets out how the council will measure progress in achieving the aims of protecting children and young people from violence, abuse and exploitation, building stronger communities, supporting families, reducing school exclusions and improving educational attainment and empowering communities to create a safer environment for all.

Section five outlines the evaluation's methodology including details of the data that was used to develop the findings and recommendations. This report draws on the local authority's own monitoring data and spoke to over 60 people, including counsellors, police, magistrates, local authority staff, CVS representatives, bereaved parents and young people.

The findings are presented in section six, which shows that there is a difference between reported incidents where young people are a victim of crime, and the everyday experiences of young people, for which the threat of violence seems to be a constant presence. Post Covid lockdowns, there has been a rise in school absences and mental health needs among young people and parents. The cost

of living crisis has put additional strain on households impacting parents' and children's resilience. These factors are putting more young people at risk of involvement in violence and of being vulnerable to exploitation.

Since 2020, there has been a significant increase in referrals to Targeted Youth Support (TYS), I-CAN and CAMHS, whilst budgets are becoming tighter. Services have responded by becoming more targeted or by focusing on delivering in the community, a model which has encouraged CAHMS to identify needs earlier in order to reach previously under-represented groups.

Statistically, there has been a reduction in youth crime and although youth violence is increasing, reported incidents are still lower than in 2019. However, for the young people interviewed for this review, crime and violence is something that they need be constantly aware of as soon as they step out of their front door. There are also concerns that young women are increasingly becoming victims of both gang and domestic violence. In response, the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) team are funding specialist staff to work across various teams on children's services and holding regular safeguarding panels.

There was a clear focus on family support and empowering parents to better support their children. Whilst additional resources have enabled young people to have access to specialist services, such as mental health support, despite CAMHS

waiting lists increasing. iTIPS has helped teachers and youth workers to become 'trauma informed' in their practice and there is a greater focus on addressing the needs of young people as early as possible, rather than simply dealing with problematic behaviour.

Section seven summarises the progress made to date and also identifies some areas in which the council could explore further development. The commitment within the borough to tackle youth violence and to ensure young people are as safe as possible is clear and there has been significant investment in interventions focused on providing individualised support. However, the context in which young people are growing up remains one in which young people do not feel safe. To help the council consider what 'neighbourhood' or 'community based' interventions could look like, this section outlines the learning from gang intervention programmes from the United Kingdom and United States drawing out potential avenues for the local authority to explore.

Section eight focuses on the evaluation's recommendations, which include suggestions on what additional data should be collected to better inform the development of future strategies as well as practice based adaptations based on existing successful community led initiatives.

Understanding
the Context

3.1 Local Context

In 2020, Islington developed a Youth Safety Strategy against the backdrop of national concern about Serious Youth Violence (SYV). 2019 had seen a seven per cent rise in knife offences nationally, and in London 23 teenagers had lost their lives. Finding no generally agreed definition of SYV, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (2023) described it as any incident involving people aged 14 to 24 that included violence causing serious injury or death; violence with the potential for causing serious injury or death; and/or carrying knives and/or other offensive weapons.

Locally in both 2018 and 2019 in Islington, an average of 1,100 young people were victims of SYV and two young people were murdered. In 2019, 100 Islington young people aged between 15 and 19 were charged with SYV offences. However, between 2019 and 2020, there was a four per cent reduction in knife crime and a 35% reduction in victims of knife crime below the age of 24. As a result, SYV in Islington was significantly lower than the London average. Despite this progress, in 2020 leaders in the borough recognised the need for a robust multi-agency Youth Safety Strategy.

3.1.1 Young People's Safety

The foreword to the Islington Youth Safety Strategy 2020-2025 document notes that:

> " *... we spoke to hundreds of children and families in the borough – unfortunately, it is clear that for many of our young people, fear of crime and violence has become a part of daily life. We are determined that this will change* "

Unfortunately, this is not a problem confined to Islington. The MOPAC Youth Survey 2021-22[1] found that around one in ten children felt unsafe at school, one in five felt unsafe in their local area and 5% felt unsafe at both home and school. Many young people were concerned about violence in their local area, with around a quarter feeling that people joining gangs, being violent and carrying knives, were a 'big problem'.

McNeill and Wheller[2] suggest that there are three broad explanations for why young people carry knives.[3] These are self protection and fear ('defensive weapon carrying'), particularly for individuals who have previously been victims of crime;[4] self-presentation, particularly for individuals who want 'street credibility' and 'respect'[5] and utility (offensive weapon carrying), particularly for individuals who use weapons to facilitate behaviours such as theft, sexual assault, injury and serious harm.[6] They also cite evidence that a lack of trust in the police can lead potential victims to become perpetrators, rather than relying on the police to protect them.[7]

1 MOPAC (Mayors Office for Policing & Crime) (2023) We Are London' Youth Survey 2021-22, MOPAC Evidence and Insight [April]
2 McNeill A. & Wheller L. (2019) Knife Crime Evidence Briefing, The College of Policing
3 Brennan I. (2019) Weapon-carrying and the Reduction of Violent Harm, The British Journal of Criminology, Volume 59, Issue 3, May 2019, Pages 571–593, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azy032
4 Lemos, G. (2004) Fear and Fashion: The Use of Knives and Other Weapons by Young People, London, Lemos & Crane
5 Silvestri A. Oldfield M. Squires P. & Grimshaw R. (2019) Young People Knives & Guns: A Comprehensive Review, Analysis and Critique of Gun and Knife Crime Strategies, London, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies
6 Brennan I. (2019) Weapon-carrying and the Reduction of Violent Harm, The British Journal of Criminology, Volume 59, Issue 3, May 2019, Pages 571–593, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azy032
7 Brennan I. (2019) Weapon-carrying and the Reduction of Violent Harm, The British Journal of Criminology, Volume 59, Issue 3, May 2019, Pages 571–593, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azy032; Silvestri A. Oldfield M. Squires P. & Grimshaw R. (2019) Young People Knives & Guns: A Comprehensive Review, Analysis and Critique of Gun and Knife Crime Strategies, London, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies

Like all other inner-city boroughs, Islington has a long-standing gang problem.[8] There are the Calley Boyz in the Caledonian Road area, EC (Easy Cash) in EC1, Red Pitch, in the east of the borough and rival gangs on the Elthorne and Andover estates. In addition, there are groups of 'Youngers' associated with the larger gangs, while some gangs have links with local OCGs.

Youth workers at Arsenal football club interviewed as part of the Premier League Breaking the Cycle of Youth Violence research programme[9] said:

> *So, for example, Elthorne and Andover are very close to each other but they've had, very, very significant incidents; they've had murders and all sorts going between the estates. But at the moment they have some sort of truce and we've got participants that go between them. We work with both groups... But, you know, the big problem in Islington (at the moment) is there's sort of two rivals, on Kally and Essex Road, that's the sort of priority at the moment*

At the time of the interview, the workers felt the situation was 'stable':

> *There's not been a murder for a few months now. So that's good, it's not as bad as it has been.*

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8   Pitts J. (2008) Reluctant Gangsters: The Changing Face of Youth Crime, London, Routledge; Pitts, J. (2019), The evolution of the English street gang, Safer Communities, Vol. 18 No. 2, pp. 64-78. https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-01-2019-0003
9   Barter C. Bracewell K. Hargreaves P. & Pitts J. The Premier League: Breaking the Cycle of Gang Violence, in Andell P. & Pitts J. (eds.) (2023) The Palgrave Handbook of Youth Gangs in the UK, London, Palgrave Macmillan

However, they were aware that this was a volatile situation and that things could change very quickly:

> *You know, one thing happens and it increases tensions, then it leads to a chain of events and everything sort of spirals … Yes, I mean, you know, there's always tensions because all it takes is for one person or one incident to happen, like there's someone that they know gets stabbed or whatever, and the fallout is significant, like it can all of a sudden affect a lot of people in one way or another. So, you know, you never know what's around the corner.*

In interviews undertaken for this review of the strategy, it was evident that fear persists and is not confined to those known to the police or the youth justice service. Almost all of those who participated in the evaluation said that they had either been robbed themselves or knew someone who had, and many knew people who had been stabbed. Typical responses from interviews that took place at a football tournament that brought young people from across the borough together were:

> *…it's embarrassing, I can't even go to the shops to buy something for my mum. There are always others hanging around and you don't know what might happen.*
>
> *We have to stay behind [at school] until 4.20 and it's dark, so when I leave and have to go home, I just shit myself.*
>
> *As soon as you step out your front door you just have to be vigilant, you know you can't go to certain areas, and you don't go out when it's dark.*
>
> *You always see young people all balied up, you never know what they are going to do.*

It was striking that there was not one young person participating in this evaluation who felt safe travelling around the borough. The fear of crime often shapes their everyday experiences and the young people appeared to believe that Islington is now less safe than a few years ago. Seeing young people 'all balied up' (wearing a balaclava) was commonplace and many commented that the gang situation in the borough was still a significant issue.

Young people discussed how they had to be vigilant as soon as they stepped out of their front door, which included avoiding travel after dark and keeping to busy areas wherever possible. Andover Estate, Elthorne Estate, Essex Road, Finsbury Park and EC1 were highlighted as particularly danger-ous areas.

The local gang context remains a concern and was something that shaped views of safety. Young people expressed concerns that:

> *…no one wants to go to EC1*
>
> *The issue between EC1 and Hoxton just affects everyone*
>
> *Andover is mad*

3.1.2 Policing and Young People

Several adult respondents in the present review have observed that young people's experience of policing in Islington is largely negative, and this is particularly true for Black and other minoritised groups and those who live in gang-affected neighbourhoods. Most young people had very little confidence in the police as they currently operate. Two young people spoke of having to wait several hours for the police to turn up after they had been robbed, after which 'the police done nothing' and they said that they would not call them again. All the other young people questioned said they did not, or would not, call the police after a robbery or an attack as there was a perception that the police didn't care enough to do anything. This reluctance to report crimes, suggests that young people's everyday experiences of crime and violence may not be fully represented in the official crime statistics.

This is not just a problem in Islington. The MOPAC Youth Survey 2021-2022[10] found that certain groups of young Londoners were less likely to have a good opinion of the police:

> *This includes those from minority ethnic backgrounds, with lowest results seen for young Black Londoners at 22% (369 of 1,712). Opinions also became more negative with age: whereas 58% of those aged 11 said they had a good overall opinion of the police, this fell to just 25% among those aged 16. Results also reveal an emerging gender gap, predominantly driven by worsening opinions among young females.*

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10   MOPAC (Mayors Office for Policing & Crime) (2023) We Are London' Youth Survey 2021-22, MOPAC Evidence and Insight [April]

Young Londoners were least confident with regard to police fairness. Only a quarter believed the police treat everyone fairly, whatever their skin colour or religion while just 17% felt the police treat young people the same as they treat adults.

> *Perceptions of fairness were again particularly low among certain groups: for example, while 40% of those aged 11 believed the police treat everyone fairly this declined to just one in ten by age 16 with similarly low levels seen for young Black Londoners at 12%. Moreover, young Londoners exposed to other forms of risk were also less likely to respond positively across a range of these perception measures.*

Those who had been a victim of a crime during the previous year were less likely to hold positive views of the police, and only one in three believed the police could

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protect them from crime compared with 56% of non-victims. Those who felt unsafe where they lived were also more likely to respond negatively. Those exposed to violence or exploitation were less likely to hold positive views. The researchers note that:

> *These findings highlight some important challenges to relationships with police amongst groups of young Londoners who may be at increased risk of wider harms.*

The MOPAC findings indicate that young Londoners agree that violence and safeguarding issues should form key priorities for policing in the capital. This said the loss of 4,000 officers in the Metropolitan Police in 2010 makes this task far more difficult.

3.1.3 The Necessity of Effective Policing

Jill Leovy believes that gang-related homicide 'epidemics' are not simply the proliferation of discreet crimes but a product of a whole system determined by the absence of law.[11] She argues that a fundamental precondition for their proliferation is the actual or apparent inability of the police to contain the threat posed by the gang. In a similar vein, Elijah Anderson describes life in the Philadelphia ghetto:

> *In some of the most economically distressed and drug and crime-ridden pockets of the city, the rules of civil law have been severely weakened, and in their stead a 'code of the streets' often holds sway ... The code of the streets emerges where the influence of the police ends and personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin,*
>
> *resulting in a kind of 'people's law' based on street justice.*[12]

The social theorist Norbert Elias[13] observes that in high crime neighbourhoods, the actual or perceived weakening of the state's capacity to protect its citizens places pressure upon individuals to assume responsibility for managing the risks and threats previously dealt with by the state. The incalculability of the threats they face leads to heightened anxiety coupled with a pressing need to find ways of alleviating that anxiety. For those who lack the wherewithal to ensure their personal security this can lead to an erosion of 'reality congruence', a process in which potential threats become exaggerated, coupled with the diminution of 'mutual identification' and tolerance. In these circumstances, young people may conclude that if 'the authorities' are either unwilling or unable to protect them, they must 'take care of business' for themselves. Based on his studies in Bristol John Rodger draws a similar conclusion:

> *Where marginality, social exclusion or sectarianism emerges,*
> *the sense of empathy for the other and the mutual restraint on*
> *behaviour which are built by frequent social interaction are absent.*
> *This tendency should be understood as a structural property of*

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11   Leovy J. (2014) Ghettoside: Investigating a Homicide Epidemic, London, The Bodley Head
12   Anderson E. (1994) The Code of the Streets, The Atlantic, May
13   Elias, N. (2000). The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations, Blackwell

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social systems where social polarization and inequality are present

or deepening and not as a property of pathological individuals. [14]

There was a real sense of isolation among the young people who participated in the evaluation brought on by the feeling that apart from family members, the adults around them, including the police, did not care for their safety. This along with the lack of trust in the ability of the police is contributing to young people feeling they can only rely on themselves and their close friends to remain safe. For some this means remaining vigilant at all times and avoiding travelling to certain areas or being out after dark, for others, needing to take responsibility for their own safety will inevitably mean carrying a weapon.

However, young people's views on the police were mixed, whilst young people were largely critical of the current actions of the police, they did recognise their importance. When asked what would make them feel safer in the borough, almost all the young people we spoke to thought more visible policing within neighbourhoods would prevent crime from happening and improve safety. In discussing this issue young people responded:

> *...if there were more police around, then people wouldn't do things, you know they would see the police there and move away.*
>
> *We need more police stations, police stations on estates would make it safer, if the police were just there.*

In assessing the effectiveness of the current Youth Safety Strategy; whether current interventions help reduce the risks young people face in their everyday lives and their feelings about their own safety has been a key consideration.

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14   Rodger J. (2008) Criminalising Social Policy: Antisocial Behaviour and Welfare in a De-civilised Society, Cullompton, Willan

3.2 The Key Concerns Informing the Islington Youth Safety Strategy 2020-2025

In the consultation period for the development of the current strategy, alongside young people's sense of safety, the following issues were raised as emerging or ongoing concerns:

3.2.1 The Impact of Covid Lockdowns

In 2020 Covid lockdowns were in place and it was unclear what the longer term impacts would be. The strategy document noted that as a result of job losses due to the lockdowns many poorer families could experience a loss of income and that this could have serious implications for the wellbeing of the children in these families.

3.2.2 Fairness, Deprivation and Child Poverty

In 2019 in Islington 60% of local families lived in social housing, 17.8% of households were workless and 21.7% were income deprived. Islington had the highest levels of income deprivation affecting children in London and 13,000 school age children in the borough were eligible for the pupil premium. Respondents expressed a wish that in the post-Covid era, Islington would be working towards the development of an inclusive economy that would support all residents, but especially the most disadvantaged children and young people.

3.2.3 Gangs and Gang Crime

Peer-on-peer violence and intergenerational gang crime were major concerns. There were fears that this would increase post-Covid if more children and families needed to rely on the proceeds of crime. It was widely viewed that much of the enforcement activity to reduce gang crime was directed towards the younger age group when older adolescents and young adults were often orchestrating gang and drug crime in the borough. County Lines exploitation remained a significant issue. A preponderance of young people involved in County Lines in Islington and adjacent boroughs were drawn from minoritised communities, but professionals and the Youth Court bench were becoming aware of an increase of white 'middle class' children involved in drug dealing, noting that they were almost certainly subject to coercion. There was also evidence of County Lines increasingly using neuro-diverse children and those with Special Educational Needs as 'runners' because they tended to be more compliant and less aware of the risks they were encountering. Practitioners wanted more, and more effective, data sharing between services to help them develop a fuller understanding of the factors influencing young people's criminal behaviour. This included greater collaboration with agencies and services from other boroughs as the young people involved and the factors influencing them are not confined to Islington. They also wanted to see more preventative work with families and the wider community. However, high thresholds were preventing some young people and families from accessing the support they needed.

3.2.4 Education and School Exclusion

Respondents were aware of the relationship between school exclusion, unmet special educational needs and low attainment, and the involvement of children and young people in crime and violence. They were also aware that school exclusions in the borough were high.

Although the authority had a stated commitment to the dissemination of trauma-informed practice to all of its schools, only some Islington schools had adopted

trauma informed strategies and the necessary staff training. Moreover, there were significant differences in the behavioural policies of schools leading to pupils across the borough being treated differently. This was raised as an issue of fairness. Most of the children who were identified as having challenging behaviour in school in Year 5 or 6, were excluded from mainstream education and placed in alternative provision by year 8.

As to the link between educational difficulties and involvement in offending, a January 2020 snapshot showed that 40% of young people involved with the Islington Youth Justice Service were NEET and 35% had at least one fixed term exclusion. 42% of these young people had left school with no qualifications and only 4% achieved 5 GCSEs at grade 4 or above. At the same time, 40 per cent of the 2020 YOS cohort were identified as needing SEND support and a further 16% had Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP). This compared with only 2.0% of Islington secondary school pupils having an EHCP and 14.2% requiring SEND Support.

3.2.5 Mental Health and Neurodiversity

In 2019 the CAMHS waiting time was 8 weeks which had been reduced from 27 weeks in part by introducing a no 'wrong referrals' policy. However, there had been an increase in girls being enrolled into the Hospital Classroom (a joint project by Whittington Hospital and New River College Pupil Referral Unit) as a result of growing self harm concerns. Before Covid-19, the Hospital Classroom had 8 pupils but in 2020 this had risen to 50. There were also concerns that the stigma around mental health meant that young people from some minoritized and deprived backgrounds were under-represented in referrals and not getting the support they needed. There was particular concern about older adolescents and young adults aged 16 to 25 and practitioners felt there needed to be a greater focus on supporting those showing signs of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There was also concern that autism diagnoses were rising, and that some parents from certain backgrounds were under the erroneous impression that their child would just 'grow out of it'.

3.2.6 Underfunding of work to protect young women

In 2020, there was a concern that the majority of funding focused on youth safety went on services to support young men and that there was not enough known, or being done, about the potential risks faced by young women from child criminal exploitation, sexual abuse and gang violence.

3.2.7 Disproportionality

While developing the 2020-2025 strategy, there were concerns that certain groups were disproportionately impacted by different forms of violence or risk factors associated with youth violence. Table 1 indicates the disproportionality related to identified risk factors in the lives of children from Black Caribbean, Black African, Mixed heritage (Black and White) and poor White backgrounds.

Table 1: Disproportionality and Youth Safety

Identified concern	Black Caribbean	Black African	Mixed-Black/White	Poor White
1st Time Entrants into the YJS	Red	Orange	Red	Green
Reoffending Rate	Orange	Red	Red	(blank)
Custody	Red	(blank)	Red	Green
SEN	Red	Green	Red	Red
Permanent Exclusion	Red	Green	Red	Red
Fixed Term Exclusion	Red	Red	Red	Red
School Absences	Red	Red	(blank)	Red
Progress 8 Scores	Red	Red	Red	Red
NEET	Red	Green	Red	Red
CIN/LAC	Red	Red	Red	Green
Gang Involvement	Red	Red	Red	(blank)
Criminal Exploitation	Red	Red	(blank)	Red
Serious Youth Violence	Red	Red	Red	Red
Child Sexual Exploitation	Red	(blank)	(blank)	(blank)
CAMHS*	(blank)	Green	Green	Red

Key	
Red	Worse than the borough average
Orange	Circa the borough's average
Green	Better than the borough average
(blank)	Not reported in 2020-2025 strategy

*There were concerns that the underrepresentation may be due to a lack of identification and referrals rather than a lack of need.

3.2.8 Data and Understanding Practice

There were concerns that although a great deal of money was spent on generating quantitative data at the system level which answered the "what" type of questions, there was little qualitative data collected to answer the "why" and "how" questions. There was a feeling that this undermined the evaluation of effectiveness. There was also a feeling that services were sometimes being duplicated because teams were working in isolation.

The Islington
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Strategy
2020-2025

The strategy took a public health approach focusing on providing interventions to young people and families to mitigate the risk factors that individual young people face to prevent their involvement in or diversion away from crime and violence. It also recognised that outreach services via an Integrated Gangs Team, TYS, and partnerships with voluntary and community sector organisations and agencies would enable the authority to reach children and young people already caught up in youth gangs and drug dealing in certain parts of the borough. There was an understanding that particular groups of children and young people (cf Table 1 above) were at greater risk of exposure to SYV as either perpetrators or victims. The strategy therefore aimed to:

1. Protect children and young people from violence, abuse and exploitation

2. Foster stronger and safer communities, public spaces and schools

3. Safeguard children and young people and support families, parents and carers

4. Build the resilience of Islington's children and young people

5. Secure school inclusion and maximise academic and vocational achievement

6. Address inequality and disproportionality within the youth and criminal justice system

7. Reduce re-offending for those children and young people who have become more persistent in their offending behaviours

8. Empower communities to create a safer environment for all, but especially for children

To achieve these objectives the action plan for this strategy was to focus on eight intervention strands:

1.	Prevention	5.	Support
2.	Identification	6.	Protection
3.	Engagement	7.	Disruption*
4.	Diversion	8.	Enforcement and Prosecution*

For the more prolific, high risk and persistent offenders

Success would be measured in terms of:

1. Increased numbers of children achieving an overall "Good Level of Development'/the percentage of pupils achieving a "Good Level of Development" in the Early Years Foundation Stage

2. Reduced numbers of fixed term and permanent exclusions in Islington schools

3. Improved attainment and progress at GCSE for Black Caribbean and White UK disadvantaged pupils so that the gap with the LBI average is narrowed

4. Reduced numbers of young people who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training)

5. Preventing more young people from entering the youth justice system for the first time

6. Reduced reoffending amongst young people who are being supervised by the YOS

7. Securing more positive outcomes for children and young people who have been victims of modern slavery/exploitation via the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) process. This will include having robust safety plans for these children after they have received a positive NRM outcome

8. Reduced disproportionality among young people from Black and minority ethnic communities

9. Reduced levels of serious youth violence

10. Reduced numbers of children who go missing from home and care

11. Reduced numbers of knife crime victims under 25

12. Increased numbers of children and young people with a Social, Emotional and Mental Health Need (SEMH) having a first appointment within 4 weeks or less.

The 2020-2025 strategy represents a 'whole system' approach to youth safety with the various council services, particularly Social Care, Health, Childrens Services, Community Safety and Youth Justice working together in partnership with the police, schools and commissioned and voluntary sector services to address known youth violence risk factors. This work draws on the council's Fairer Together Borough

Partnership approach that seeks to utilise local resources to build strengths, relationships and community. The strategy is built on the principle of being OPTIMISTIC:

- Opportunities for young people to share their experiences
- Parenting support and resilience
- Training employment and education – identifying and supporting SEND
- Mentoring and role model services
- Improve relations with the police
- Substance misuse and alcohol services
- Transitions services
- Inclusive universal youth offer
- Coping mechanisms robust and SEMH services

For this evaluation, the strategy's objectives and KPIs have been grouped into the thematic categories outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Strategy Themes, Objectives, and KPIs

Theme	Focus
Youth Safety	**Objectives**
	Protect children and young people from violence, abuse and exploitation
	Foster stronger and safer communities, public spaces and schools
	Safeguard children and young people and support families, parents and carers
	KPIs
	Secure more positive outcomes for children and young people who have been victims of modern slavery/exploitation via the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) process. This will include having robust safety plans for these children after they have received a positive NRM outcome
	Reduced levels of serious youth violence
	Reduce the number of children who go missing from home and care
	Reduce the number of knife crime victims under 25
Educational Inclusion and Attainment	**Objectives**
	Secure school inclusion and maximise academic and vocational achievement
	KPIs
	Increased numbers of children achieving an overall "Good Level of Development/percentage of pupils achieving a Good Level of Development in the Early Years Foundation Stage
	Reduce the number of fixed term and permanent exclusions in Islington schools
	Improved attainment and progress at GCSE for Black Caribbean and White UK Disadvantaged pupils so that the gap with the LBI average is narrowed
	Reduce the number of young people who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training)
Partnership Working, Developing Youth Resilience, and Community Empowerment	**Objectives**
	Build the resilience of Islington's children and young people
	Empower communities to create a safer environment for all, but especially for children
	KPIs
	Increased the number of children and young people having a first appointment with a Social, Emotional and Mental Health Need (SEMH) service within 4 weeks or less
Justice and Equality	**Objectives**
	Reduce re-offending for those children and young people who have become more persistent in their offending behaviours
	Address inequality and disproportionality within the youth and criminal justice system
	KPIs
	Prevent more young people from entering the youth justice system for the first time
	Reduce reoffending amongst young people who are being supervised by the YOS
	Reduce disproportionality among young people from Black and minority ethnic communities

Evaluation
Methodology

London Metropolitan University and Professor John Pitts were commissioned to evaluate the effectiveness of the current strategy as part of the council's response to ongoing concerns around youth safety and to inform its future thinking. The evaluation did not assess progress against the strategy's work plan as the council already monitors this. Instead, although the evaluation did review relevant performance reports, the majority of the data analysed came from interviews and focus groups with stakeholders from various council services, the police, VCS commissioned partners, and Islington parents and young people. Following the recent deaths of young people in the borough, Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership (ISCP) commissioned Collier Safeguarding to conduct an independent thematic review regarding Black and Black mixed heritage boys at risk of Serious Youth Violence, which also informed this evaluation.

5.1 Evaluation Aims and Objectives

The evaluation considered the progress toward the strategy's objectives through the following questions:

1. How has progress towards implementing the strategy contributed to reducing the risk young people face

2. How are the identified actions supporting the young people and families most at risk of exposure to youth violence

3. What additional needs or risks have emerged since the strategy was published, and how are they/can they be addressed

5.2 Quantitative and Secondary Data Analysis

Performance reports compiled as part of the council's processes, school exclusion, youth justice and local crime data were also reviewed. A list of all the secondary data sources is outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Secondary Data Sources
Youth Safety Action Plans
Youth Safety Performance Reports
School Exclusion Data
YJS First Time Entrant Data
SEMH CPA Data

5.3 Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with key stakeholders (see Table 4 for details) to understand what the council and its partners are doing to enhance youth safety, what is working well, what needs improving and to assess potential future risks. The majority of interviews and focus groups were conducted virtually using Teams. Where respondents expressed a preference, interviews were Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with key stakeholders (see Table 4 for details) to understand what the council and its partners are doing to enhance youth safety, what is working well, what needs improving and to assess potential future risks. The majority of interviews and focus groups were conducted virtually using Teams. Where respondents expressed a preference, interviews were conducted face-to-face. The data collected was coded thematically using NVIVO. The focus of the empirical data collection was to understand:

1. Staff members and stakeholders' views on the effectiveness of the current interventions in helping to reduce the risks young people face

2. Staff members' and stakeholders' future concerns

3. Parents' views on the effectiveness of the current efforts to address the risks young people face

4. Young people's understanding of the risks they face and the effectiveness of current efforts to keep them safe

Table 4: Evaluation Participants	Number of Participants
Young People	30
Parents and family members	4
VCS staff	4
Police officers	3
Youth Court Judges	2
Local authority/NHS staff responsible for action plan delivery	17
Council Members	2

5.4 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used with key members of staff, partners, parents and young people identified by the local authority. The Love and Loss group helped identify parents affected by knife crime, while Arsenal in the Community, and Islington Youth Justice Service (YJS) connected the evaluation team with young people to take part in the evaluation.

5.5 Validity and Trustworthiness

Rather than aiming for statistical significance from large data samples, the evaluation ensured trustworthiness through data saturation, collecting data until no new themes were emerging, and comparing various data sources such as interviews, focus groups, annual performance reports and official statistics to develop a coherent narrative.

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Evaluation
Analysis

Throughout the evaluation, the council and its partners' commitment to, and investment in, embedding a preventative public health model that emphasised supporting young people as early as possible was evident. However, there are substantial challenges ahead, particularly those concerning resourcing. There are also concerns that despite significant developments in early intervention by council services and Education, many young people are only referred for support when they come to the attention of the police or when they are having difficulty at secondary school. Respondents recognised that in many cases this was "late". It is also clear that the risks associated with social media have proved very difficult to deal with and that online and offline child criminal exploitation continues. It was clear throughout the evaluation that there are robust processes in place that seek to provide support for families and individuals at risk. The understanding of these factors and the commitment to address them is to be commended, and outcomes for those supported should be significantly improved in the long term. Yet, however good these individualised services are, the context young people find themselves in now, one that is fraught with danger, remains. As evidenced in section 3.1, it is concerning that young people remain significantly worried for their own safety. A further discussion on how the local authority and its partners can build on the current good work in the borough and start to change the context young people have to navigate in their everyday lives can be found in section seven. Ensuring young people feel safer will help remove the self protection element of McNeill and Wheller's[15] rationale of why young people carry weapons and will be another important step in tackling knife crime.

Before this review considers actions to address young people's immediate concerns, this section will outline some ongoing situational issues that are continuing to influence efforts to tackle youth safety in Islington. Most notably during this evaluation the Covid-19 lockdowns, cost of living crisis and funding cuts were identified as impacting efforts to keep young people safe. The lockdowns are still having an impact, as evidenced by the widely reported fall in school attendance and

15   McNeill A. & Wheller L. (2019) Knife Crime Evidence Briefing, The College of Policing

the rise in mental health problems among school-age children and young people. These problems have been exacerbated by the post-Covid cost of living crisis. The report will then consider the progress made towards meeting the objectives stated in the strategy in the areas of:

- Youth Safety

- Educational Inclusion and Attainment

- Partnership Working, Developing Youth Resilience, and Community Empowerment

- Justice and Equality

6.1 Wider Situational Issues

6.1.1 The Lasting Impact of Covid

The context in which support is being offered is getting harder. There are concerns that many young people and parents' mental health deteriorated during the lockdowns, thus increasing the need for already over-subscribed mental health support services. These additional mental health needs were thought to be impacting the effectiveness of the support offered to young people and their families. Social anxiety, heightened by the lockdowns was also considered to be the largest contributory factor in the post Covid-19 decrease in school attendance. Both of these issues will be discussed in more detail throughout this report.

6.1.2 The Financial Climate

There was significant financial stress on households before Covid-19 with 47.5[16] per cent of children in Islington living in poverty. The cost of living crisis has exacerbated this strain and was identified by those working with families as impacting parental mental health. This economic climate also adds to young people's vulnerability to exploitation and criminal activity as they seek to make their own money and rely less on their financially stretched parents.

At the same time the local authority, and many of its partners, have had to deal with a steady reduction in their funding during a decade of central government's austerity policies, and this has contributed to stretched and oversubscribed services. Moreover, the financial climate is set to worsen with cuts to the Council's budgets, including significant reductions across all children's services in the borough, planned in 2024/2025. Staff members commented that resourcing pressures mean that much of their capacity is focused on dealing with immediate issues and crises leaving little space to focus on strategic planning or service enhancements.

6.1.3 Short Term Funding Cycles

Islington Council has a strong track record of securing additional funding from government bodies such as the Department of Justice, MOPAC and the VRU, and this has contributed to Children's Services being comparatively well resourced. However, this external funding, which supports the work of TYS, I-CAN and the VAWG team, amongst others, is all short-term (2 years or less), and although it may increase present capacity it can also undermine service continuity. With the current pressures on central and regional government budgets, it is expected that the amount of money available to bid for will decrease. VCS partners are in a similar situation with some senior staff observing that most of their time is spent trying to keep projects funded, rather than developing and improving services.

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16   Islington Giving (2019) Alarming child poverty rates in Islington. Available at https://islingtongiving.org.uk/alarm-ing-child-poverty-rates-in-islington/

6.1.4 Increased Need

There are concerns across the board that the impact of funding cuts will be compounded by increased demand for services, despite the number of young people living in the borough decreasing. For example, there is now a higher number of young people awaiting a CAHMS diagnosis or an EHCP assessment than a few years ago. The waiting time for a neurodiversity assessment from CAHMS is now two years and for therapy is 11 months. CAHMS will no longer take referrals for young people aged 17 and a half as they will still be on the waiting list by the time they turn 18 and will have to be passed on to adult mental health services. However, adult mental health services have a long wait time to be seen.

These resourcing issues and increased need mean that difficult decisions will to have be made and although the local authority and its partners have shown themselves to be good at prioritising and doing more for less, there are concerns that gaps in service delivery will get bigger. In effect, the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdowns, coupled with the cost of living crisis and the limited ability of the local authority and its partners to respond effectively to the needs of those from communities and neighbourhoods in which gang involvement is often seen as the best or only option, means that the pool of available young people to engage in criminal and violent activity will increase.[17]

6.2 Current Response to Resourcing Pressures

Responses to the current and expected resourcing pressures vary as services seek ways to ensure young people are supported. Many services spoke of needing to become more data-led and targeted. This was most evident concerning ASB and community safety. However, CAHMS' more universal support strategy of embedding services within family hubs and schools, alongside training children's workers, teachers and youth workers to identify potential SEMH concerns, make referrals earlier and provide initial support will, they believe, prevent the need for more targeted and specialist interventions in the future.

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17   Harding, S. (ed.) (2020) 'Getting Started: 'Put Me On, Bruv', in County Lines: Exploitation and Drug Dealing among Urban Street Gangs. Bristol University Press, pp. 61–100. Available at: https://doi.org/10.46692/9781529203097.005

6.2.1 Hot Spot Identification

Islington Council has a robust process of identifying hotspots based on reported anti-social behaviour. Once a hotspot is identified the community safety team and the police jointly develop a plan that includes increasing PCSO patrols, considering environmental changes and deploying the council's detached youth workers to identify, engage with, signpost and refer young people to relevant support and diversionary services. Action plans also include understanding the license conditions of any young person identified in the area and taking enforcement action if necessary.

Although targeting hotspots is essential to addressing community safety concerns, hotspots tend to remain stable, with Finsbury Park, the Elthorne Estate and Caledonian Road continually identified in the evaluation as the three main ASB and crime hot spots. These areas are some of the most deprived and diverse areas of the borough.[18] However, the identification of these as hotspots also means focusing on areas with higher concentrations of visibly poorer Black young men, potentially increasing their identification with problematic behaviour. With the capacity of support services stretched and budget cuts expected, the emerging gaps in support are likely to be filled with enforcement activity.[19] Therefore, increased reliance on data and hotspot mapping and reduced resource capacity could result in more Black young men from deprived areas being subject to enforcement action.

6.2.2 Targeted or Universal Services

Budgetary constraints have led some services to suggest that they will need to be more targeted and innovative in their approach. However, becoming more targeted may mean that particular groups of young people get supported at a later stage in their development, or find it harder to access the support they need.

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18   OSCI (2020)Local Insight profile for 'Hillrise' area. OSCI (2020) Local Insight profile for 'Finsbury Park' area. OSCI (2020) Local Insight profile for 'Caledonian' area

19   Vitale, A (2017) The End of Policing.London: Verso

Universal services can identify and support the needs of young people earlier than targeted support. As such, being more targeted, which usually means relying on referrals and assessments from professionals, identification by the police or community safety, or behaviour which meets a particular administrative threshold, may result in delays in support and increase the need for more intensive interventions later. There is already a sense among practitioners that interventions are starting too late. This diminishes their impact because by the time the young person is offered help their needs may have become more complex and they may be more resistant to intervention. Professional anxiety stemming from concerns over such delays can lead to referrals to multiple interventions, which can be overwhelming, and reduce their effectiveness. It can also mean young people are left with little support once the period of intense engagement ends.

6.3 Progress on Themes Relating to Strategy Objectives

For this evaluation, the objectives and KPIs of the Youth Safety Strategy 2020-2025 were grouped into the following themes:

- Youth Safety
- Educational Inclusion and Attainment
- Partnership Working, Community Empowerment and Developing Youth Resilience
- Justice and Equality

These groupings were designed to reflect themes emerging from the qualitative data whilst addressing developments related to achieving the stated objectives. It is recognised that this is a practical decision and that the objectives and KPIs could have been grouped differently.

6.3.1 Youth Safety

There are mixed views on the levels of crime and violence young people are experiencing. First time entrants have been reducing for several years and are now one third lower compared with 2019. Statistically, there have been reductions in high volume crimes such as theft from a person involving young people. The police reported that they are not seeing an upturn in these typically peer or peer offences, which can be catalysts for youth violence.

However, there is a sense among many professionals who commission or are engaged in frontline delivery and young people themselves (see section 3.1.1) that young people are more likely to be victims of peer on peer crime now than a few years ago. One adult respondent suggested that young people feel that they will have their phone stolen at least once a year.

The trend in youth violence is clearer with incidents slowly rising after a 25% reduction in knife crime during the Covid lockdown period. This is consistent with trends across London. The police expect serious youth violence to reach and then pass pre-Covid levels in the coming years. However, they do not predict a significant and unmanageable rise.

Even though, based on current trends, the police feel that youth violence will remain manageable in the foreseeable future, the lack of reporting by young victims, potential cuts to interventions, growing waiting lists for support, continued external pressures, including the cost of living crisis, diminished adult mental health services, and the influence of social media, may contribute to an accelerated future increase in youth violence.

In keeping with trends in other boroughs practitioners reported that violent incidents are becoming more random making it harder to predict who will be involved. There are also concerns about an increase in the number of 'independent' young people who are dealing drugs ("floaters"). They have no obvious affiliation to any particular area, group or gang. Respondents observed that these young people will readily use violence. There is therefore a wider group of young people becoming involved

in violence and more young people are first coming to the attention of the police following a weapons offence. Most perpetrators of weapons offences in the borough were already known to children's services in some capacity before their first arrest.

This means that despite progress in implementing the youth safety strategy, youth violence is increasing and residents, particularly young people continue to feel unsafe. Many feel anxious about travelling around the borough, including to and from school and to youth activities, particularly if this involves traversing territory claimed by a gang. Young people's sense of safety is further affected by seeing ASB and open drug dealing and drug use in their local area. Social media was seen by many respondents as exacerbating the fear young people experience and was identified as a catalyst for violence.

6.3.2 The Vulnerability of Girls and Young Women

Offending and other problematic behaviours among young women is increasing and around 50% of pupils at New River College are now girls. There are concerns that these developments may be partly explained by exploitation and coercion.[20] While, to date, much of the attention of practitioners has been on the safety of young men, young women are at increasing risk of youth violence and exploitation.

Information from the council's VAWG team indicates that there are 1,500 survivors of domestic abuse accessing local services at present (a more than four-fold increase since before the Covid lockdown period). Within this group, young women aged between 16 and 24 years are heavily represented. In response, the council holds the equivalent of daily MARAC meetings, through a Daily Safeguarding Meeting, reviewing an average of 3 cases per day. The VAWG team have the capacity to provide counselling support for 80 women and girls, but this is a small number in the light of the need and there is very little support for the children in domestic abuse situations. The clearly established link between the experience of familial violence and involvement in youth violence[21], and the way it affects both boys and

20   Havard, T.E. et al. (2023) 'Street gangs and coercive control: The gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines', Criminology & Criminal Justice, 23(3), pp. 313–329. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/17488958211051513.
21   Gray, P. et al. (2021) Serious youth violence and its relationship with adverse childhood experiences, Academic Insights 2021/13 HM Inspectorate of Probation

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girls,[22] should be considered when planning the resourcing of interventions aimed at preventing youth violence.

Despite the current financial pressures, the council have committed to maintaining current levels of spending on women's and girls' safety. However, like other services, the team's budget is supplemented by competitive short-term funding from the VRU and other funders, which makes longer term planning and ensuring continuity of support services difficult. There is a concern that women and girls are often invisible in discussions about youth violence although they are often direct or vicarious victims. The VAWG team runs training sessions and consults with I-CAN and the YJS to ensure that wellbeing of the female partners of the young men who are supported through these services is considered. While this is important work, given the increased safeguarding risks young women face and that young women entering the youth justice system are disproportionately likely to also be supported by social care[23] the council may want to consider how they might mainstream support to young women within their social care, early help and youth justice services.

22   Shepherd, S.M. et al. (2019) 'An analysis of high-risk offending pathways for young females in custody.', Psychiatry, psychology, and law : an interdisciplinary journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law, 26(2), pp. 194–205. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2018.1487344
23   Baidawi, S. and Ball, R. (2023) 'Child protection and youth offending: Differences in youth criminal court-involved children by dual system involvement', Children and Youth Services Review, 144, p. 106736. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106736

6.4 Educational Attainment and Inclusion

When asked about who they could talk to about their fear and anxiety, one young person said that they could speak to their school counsellor as they had already been referred to them by a teacher. However, most young people said that they did not trust anyone other than their close friends to discuss their concerns. Overall, schools were considered to be focussed on GCSEs and uninterested in helping young people keep safe. Some young people mentioned that there had been school assemblies on knife crime and how to stay safe, but they did not find them helpful. A few young people said they thought teachers did not care and that schools could be doing more to keep young people safe, which included having more after school activities to give young people a safe space to socialise. Pupils from one school commented that the longer school day meant that they had to go home in the dark, which put them at additional risk.

On reducing school exclusions, current progress is mixed. There has been a 52% reduction in permanent exclusions for the 2021/2022 academic year compared with 2018/2019. However, 2021/2022 saw a 21% increase in secondary school suspensions (formally 'fixed term exclusions') compared with 2018/2019. There was a 3% reduction in primary suspensions in 2021/2022, however, due to lower pupil numbers, the primary exclusion rate is proportionately now slightly higher than in 2016. School suspensions increase a young person's likelihood of being involved in criminal activity[24] and so increases in the suspension rate could mean that more young people are at risk of exposure to activities that may lead to them encountering violent behaviour.

Schools across the borough vary in what they see as behaviour warranting a suspension or exclusion. Some schools have a more inclusive behavioural policy, whilst others are suspending pupils for relatively minor infringements.[25] This means

24   Mittleman, J. (2018). A Downward Spiral? Childhood Suspension and the Path to Juvenile Arrest. Sociology of Education, 91(3), 183-204. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040718784603
25   Collier, J (2024) Islington Safeguarding Children's Partnership: Thematic Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (Phase Two) Children at risk of Serious Youth Violence and Extra Familial Harm

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there are considerable differences in how young people are treated depending on the school they attend.

The council's education team have sought to reduce school exclusions through its iTIPS programme which trains and supports teachers to implement trauma-informed approaches. However, the take up has been mixed, with 30 primary schools and only five secondary schools engaging in the programme[26]. There is anecdotal evidence that since their involvement in iTIPS some schools are starting to address the factors underlying a pupil's problematic behaviour rather than simply disciplining them. This has improved their attendance and helped them and their families to access other support services. However, there is no evidence of changes in school behavioural policies and it is too early to see if iTIPS will contribute to creating a more inclusive school environment in the longer term.

New River College is currently supporting between 150 and 200 students in their own schools in order to prevent their exclusion. New River College also assesses the suitability of excluded young people to return to mainstream education. This seems to be a robust process that schools trust and has helped the reintegration of primary aged pupils back into mainstream schooling. However, it is still difficult for the council to place secondary school pupils who have been involved in violence back into mainstream education and settings. TYS, I-CAN and YJS staff commented that this is because schools can struggle to manage the real and perceived risks and complexities associated with these pupils. Given the well established link between exclusions and suspensions and youth violence,[27] more work needs to be done to help schools understand how to manage pupils' behaviour to avoid suspensions.

Considering attendance more widely, since the Covid lockdowns, Islington has an 8.6% secondary school absence rate, up from 5.6% in 2018/2019, and its persistent absentee rate (those who have missed 10% or more of the school year) has risen from 14.2% to 26.5% so now 6,360 Islington pupils miss school on a

26   Collier, J (2024) Islington Safeguarding Children's Partnership: Thematic Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (Phase Two) Children at risk of Serious Youth Violence and Extra Familial Harm
27   Irwin-Rogers, Keir, Muthoo, Abhinay and Billingham, Luke (2020) Youth Violence Commission: final report. Youth Violence Commission. Kennedy-Turner, K. et al. (2021) 'Beyond educational attainment: The role of achievement and school absence in the development of criminal justice involvement.', Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement, 53(4), pp. 412–422. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/cbs0000260.

persistent basis, up from 3,447, before Covid. There has also been a threefold increase in children being "home schooled". Post-lockdown parental and child social anxiety was identified by professionals as a key reason for the reduction in school attendance and the increase in home schooling. Schools and the council's Education Team have increased their outreach activities to try and engage those on a school roll but not attending, yet it is not clear how effective these efforts have been, nor does there seem to be a robust process to ensure that those who are officially being home schooled are being comprehensively educated.

Despite a focus on improving school attainment for Black pupils and White pupils on free school meals, these groups are still underperforming and more likely to be absent when compared to other groups in Islington and more widely across London. School non-attendance, whether through avoidance, suspension or exclusion, has a twofold impact on youth offending. In the first instance, poor attendance is often a precursor for poor academic attainment, which increases the risk of offending behaviour[28] and being criminally and/or sexually exploited.[29]

The more supportive and nurturing character of primary schools means that many of the issues impacting school attendance manifest themselves in secondary school.[30] The transition service, provided by TYS is helping children identified as at risk of

28   Kennedy-Turner, K. et al.(2021) 'Beyond educational attainment: The role of achievement and school absence in the development of criminal justice involvement.', Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement, 53(4), pp. 412–422. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/cbs0000260.
29   Just for Kids Law. 2020. Excluded, Exploited and Forgotten: Childhood Criminal Exploitation and School Exclusion. London: Just for Kids Law.
30   Alexander, J and O'Shaunessy, M (2022) Evaluation of Camden Local Authority's Youth Safety Taskforce. Camden Council

having trouble negotiating the transition to secondary school, but have no statutory support in place, become more resilient and confident in their social interactions and managing their behaviour. This team also plays an important role in helping the pupil's new school understand their support needs. This advocacy role is considered crucial in helping schools understand what adjustments are needed.[31] However, as with other services, it was reported that the number of children that need to be supported by the transitions service far outstrips the current capacity.

For many young people, teachers are the first professionals who are in a position to identify and respond to potential support needs. Schools are a vital source of referrals to CAMHS, Early Help and Social Care. However, the ability of schools to act in a pastoral and nurturing manner is impacted by the resources available.[32] Schools are already managing tight budgets, which have been further stretched by increasing SEND needs and higher numbers of early years children who, due to the Covid lockdowns, are experiencing social and language delays. This situation could become more pressured as the decrease in school entrants may lead to school closures and higher concentrations of pupils with additional needs within the schools that remain open, without these schools necessarily receiving an uplift in their funding.

The percentage of NEET and 16 to 17 year olds with unrecorded post-16 destinations in 2022/2023 (4.5%) is only 1% lower than in the previous year and remains higher than the central London average. The council's Education Team is supporting NEET young people with their post-16 progression, taking referrals from other council services including social care and youth justice. The team help young people apply for college courses and continue to support them to attend after enrolment. Despite this support, the Education Team can find it difficult to secure a college place for young people who want to move on from their past circumstances. Much of their efforts are spent helping colleges understand how to manage the potential risks associated with offering a place to those young people who have previously been involved in violence.

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31   Alexander, J (2022) Evaluation of Islington and Camden's Parent Empowerment Project. Islington Council, Camden Council, Violence Reduction Unit
32   Irwin-Rogers, Keir, Muthoo, Abhinay and Billingham, Luke (2020) Youth Violence Commission: final report

6.5 Partnership Working, Developing Youth Resilience, and Community

6.5.1 Geographically based interventions

The Community Safety Team have engaged local organisations to develop 350 safe havens where people can go and access support if they feel threatened. 4000 weapons have been placed in knife surrender bins in the past two years. The council has worked to deter retailers from stocking knives and there are only five shops in the borough where they can be bought, making it harder for young people to purchase knives locally. However, there is concern that knives are easily purchased online, sometimes as self assembly kits to make detection harder.

The past few years have seen a closer partnership between housing, community safety and social services, particularly in the case of cuckooed tenants. Suspended eviction notices, which ban potential exploiters from the homes, are now issued to vulnerable tenants of cuckooed properties. This policy has helped reduce cuckooed properties in the borough from 90 to 30 within a year, whilst avoiding the costs and trauma that repossessions always cause.

6.5.2 Family Support

Islington Council have invested heavily in a universal offer to families including Bright Start and Bright Futures as well as early help, family help, and ASIP (their edge of care provision). This is helping to ease the burden on statutory service support. For example, ASIP is contributing to a reduction in children going into care and helping to reduce the borough's looked after children from 409 to 303. As a result, the borough's care leaver numbers have reduced from over 600 to 530.

This is important progress as suitable housing for young people, especially semi-independent living units is in short supply. The council needs 90 units a year to meet its demand but has only around 40 available and Children's Services is already £2.5 million over their 16+ housing budget for this year. There are also concerns that

drug dealing regularly takes place in some of the properties where young people are housed. Those over 18 are often moved from hotel to hotel and this can negatively impact their engagement with support services. Given the link between going into care, the type of housing they are placed in; and child criminal exploitation,[33] reducing the number of children going into care is vital. The council also needs to ensure that the young people they need to house are placed in safe accommodation that protects them from potential exploitation and supports rather than hinders their access to services they need.

Although it may be preferable to keep children and young people with their families for the reasons outlined above, this should not be at the cost of children and young people remaining in damaging or dangerous situations. Helping parents develop positive relationships with their children and navigate statutory and other services helps reduce the risks of a young person engaging in youth violence.[34] However, practitioners reported that parental needs are now more complex, partly due to the impact of the lockdowns and the lack of adult support services. This often leads to interventions focusing on parents' immediate concerns rather than positive outcomes for children, particularly for the under-12s. Some practitioners reported that by the time they start working with a young person it feels too late.

6.5.3 Child and Youth Support

There are concerns across the board that demand for services is increasing, despite fewer young people living in the borough. The current economic climate and national government policy mean that local authority funding is decreasing, while the complexity of needs is increasing. There are now circa 2000 children with an EHCP living in the borough, over double the number of children that had a Statement of Educational Needs, with the increase partly due to changes under the Children and Families Act (2014) that ensured SEMH was included in new support plans.

33   Andell J, Pitts J (2018) The end of the line: The impact of county lines drug distribution on youth crime in a target desti-nation. Youth and Policy. Available at: http://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/the-end-of-the-line/
34   Caulfield, L. et al. (2023) 'Engaging parents to reduce youth violence: evidence from a youth justice board pathfinder programme', Crime Prevention and Community Safety, 25(4), pp. 401–426. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41300-023-00190-4.Leschied, A.W. (2011) 'The Correlates of Youth Violence: Evidence from the Literature', International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies, 2(2.1), pp. 233–262. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs22.120117707.

Currently, the wait for a CAMHS assessment for children under 5 years old is 11 months and for those over 5 years old it is 18 months. However, although increased need has impacted waiting times, so has a better awareness of neurodiversity within the borough, leading to more referrals. The latter should result in more children and young people's needs being met in the long term. There are now more young people waiting for a CAHMS diagnosis or an EHCP who need specialist support than when the Youth Safety Strategy was developed. Although The North Central Hub does have funding to outsource and fast track assessments in certain situations, and children no longer need a CAHMS diagnosis before they get an EHCP. Disconnecting the EHC and CAHMS assessment process removes a significant bottleneck within the system and means young people will have more chance of receiving some support within the school setting sooner.

Three year data from the SEMH referrals into the council's central point of access shows a 266% increase between the years 2019/2020 and 2021/2022.Table 5 (below) shows the proportion of referrals of the Islington school age population and the increase in the referral rate over the three years the data covers. There has been some significant progress in addressing the under-representation of particular ethnicities being referred for SEMH support. For example, there has been a 382% increase in referrals of Black African children and a 700% increase in referrals for children with a Bangladeshi background. Although there is still ethnic disproportionately, the levels of underrepresentation are decreasing.

Ethnicity	Islington Resident Population	Current Percentage of referrals	Proportion Difference	Increase in referrals since 2019
White-British	26.2%	31.7%	5.5%	249.3%
White-Other	16.4%	14.6%	-1.8%	255.1%
Asian-Bangladeshi	6.3%	3.5%	-2.8%	427.3%
Asian-Other	2.0%	3.8%	1.8%	700.0%
Black-Caribbean	4.6%	5.4%	0.8%	122.0%
Black-African	16.9%	10.1%	-6.8%	382.9%
Black-Other	1.7%	3.9%	2.2%	160.0%
Mixed - White & Black-Caribbean	4.5%	4.7%	0.2%	229.2%
Mixed-Other	13.6%	17.9%	4.3%	294.7%
Any Other Ethnicity	7.9%	4.5%	-3.4%	341.2%
Unknown / Not Recorded		34.5%		93.0%

Overall, SEMH referrals have increased by 39% from 1358 in 2019 to 2256 in 2022, this includes a 43% increase in referrals for girls and a 30% increase for boys. Additional referrals indicate that there is greater awareness of SEMH amongst those supporting young people in Islington. The majority (70%) of this increase has been for referrals of 11 to 18 year olds, who now make up 63% of referrals into the Central Point of Access. Despite a 56% increase in referrals for under 5s, most referrals are still for secondary school age children (46%). This means that many young people's SEMH needs are still not being recognised at primary school, which delays support being offered and makes interventions less effective.

Earlier identification of neurodiversity is crucial, especially for those who are high functioning. This group are more frequently diagnosed late and are significantly over-represented in the criminal justice system.[35] Such delays in referral and subsequent diagnosis deny the young person and their family the opportunity to

35   Gunasekaran, S. and Chaplin, E. (2012) 'Autism spectrum disorders and offending', Advances in Mental Health and Intellectual Disabilities. Edited by E. Chaplin, 6(6), pp. 308–313

benefit from specialist support and interventions to embed coping skills at a younger age. Diagnosis delays and the lack of support can contribute to a breakdown in parent and child relationships, school exclusion and school avoidance[36]. In addition, as noted above, because of the waiting time, CAHMS will not take a referral for young people aged over 17 years and 6 months as they will turn 18 before an assessment takes place. However, the wait for adult mental health services is four years. Given the over-representation of those with ASD[37] and other mental health[38] concerns within the criminal justice system, particularly for violent and sexual offences[39], these delays are all contributory factors to the disproportionate levels of neurodivergent young people within the youth justice system. As Black children are more likely to receive a diagnosis later than other groups,[40] this will contribute to their disproportionately worse school engagement and performance and their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.

The local authority and Whittington NHS Trust (in which the CAMHS service sits) are addressing these issues by developing an integrated approach that bases support on need rather than diagnosis. More mental health services are being delivered in the community, which include upskilling youth practitioners, VCS staff and teachers to provide mental health support and there are CAHMS practitioners embedded in family hubs. Currently, work is focusing on improving support for under 5s and includes supporting the infant feeding team to identify babies having problems breastfeeding (a sign of potential neurodiversity), and at the 1 year check up there is a new tool to identify speech and language needs and provide early interventions.

36   Allely, C.S. et al. (2017) 'Violence is Rare in Autism: When It Does Occur, Is It Sometimes Extreme?', The Journal of Psychology, 151(1), pp. 49–68.Bjørkly, S. (2009) 'Risk and dynamics of violence in Asperger's syndrome: A systematic review of the literature.', Aggression and Violent Behavior, 14, pp. 306–312; King, C. and Murphy, G.H.(2014) 'A systematic review of people with autism spectrum disorder and the criminal justice system.', Journal of autism and developmental disorders, 44(11), pp. 2717–2733.Woodbury-Smith, M. and Dein, K. (2014) 'Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Unlawful Behaviour: Where Do We Go from Here?', Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 44(11), pp. 2734–2741

37   Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2021) Neurodiversity in the criminal justice system: A review of evidence. Available at : https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/cjji/inspections/neurodiversity-in-the-criminal-justice-system-a-review-of-evidence/. Slaughter, A.M. et al. (2019) 'Criminal Behavior and School Discipline in Juvenile Justice-Involved Youth with Autism', Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 49(6), pp. 2268–2280

38   Ministry of Justice (2020). The Youth Justice Population. Publication Parliament UK. Available at: https://publications. parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmjust/306/30606.htm

39   Allely, C.S. et al. (2017) 'Violence is Rare in Autism: When It Does Occur, Is It Sometimes Extreme?', The Journal of Psychology, 151(1), pp. 49–68.Cheely, C.A. et al. (2012) 'The Prevalence of Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders in the Criminal Justice System', Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 42(9), pp. 1856–1862.Del Pozzo, J., Roché, M.W. and Silverstein, S.M. (2018) 'Violent behavior in autism spectrum disorders: Who's at risk?', Aggression and Violent Behavior, 39, pp. 53–60

40   House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee., (2021). Children and young people's mental health Eighth Report of Session 2021–22 Report

The next stage will be to start embedding CAMHS into the work of Bright Futures (for ages 5 and up). This strategy aims to identify needs, including those who are high functioning, but neurodiverse, at the earliest opportunity and prevent children from needing specialist intervention later. This approach has helped engage some previously under-represented groups, for example, 40 per cent of CAHMS referrals coming via the early years services are for Somali children. Although this could appear to be disproportionate, this means that a previously under-supported group are now being reached better by mental health services. Despite the clear plan for early intervention within the community hubs model, there are concerns that the funding for the three family hubs in Islington ends in March 2025 and although there is a commitment to continue the work, it is not yet clear whether it will be at current levels.

The North Central Hub is also working with schools to develop a more inclusive environment that enables pupils to remain in school and teachers to respond to individual needs. This includes 6 schools that will be part of a DfE funded pilot project that aims to make primary schools more inclusive and able to respond to pupils showing signs of neurodiversity and foetal alcohol syndrome disorder.

There are also plans to develop an SEMH dashboard that will allow data to be scrutinised and inform changes in practice in real time, and a co-production policy has been developed to ensure young people are engaged in future strategic developments.

However, although there has been substantial progress in the support offered to younger age children, including within many primary schools, which are now much better at managing the needs of their pupils, there have been fewer improvements in interventions for older children. Secondary schools and the available alternative provision are still considered difficult to influence and an environment lacking a strong multi-disciplinary approach to addressing pupils' needs. There is a recognition within the borough that there are many young people who, due to their age, have not yet benefited from the early intervention approach that the family hubs model brings. The North Central Hub aims to develop a stronger vision for how CAMHS, youth justice, Social Care and Education can work together to address this.

The local authority has sought to address some of these concerns through resourcing its Targeted Youth Support (for 10 -21 year olds) and Islington Collaboration Network (10- 25 year olds), partly funded by the Department of Justice' Turn Around Project, to include psychologists, and speech and language specialists, to help provide support (but not diagnosis) to those who cannot engage with or are waiting for CAHMS and adult mental health services.

Although these specialist support services are playing a vital role in trying to compensate for the lack of capacity within CAMHS and adult mental health services, practitioners are concerned that the need will soon outstrip capacity leading to long wait times. One suggestion was to divert some of the specialist support away from the older I-CAN cohort, where engagement and progress seem to be slower to free up additional support for younger children. However, refocusing this support may exacerbate the difficulties young people have when transitioning to adult support, which has already been identified as under-resourced, less flexible and not equipped to deal with the needs presented by those supported by I-CAN.

TYS and I-CAN have a good track record of supporting young people on the cusp of offending, with the majority of the young people engaging with TYS not needing youth justice support. Around 50% of the young people they support are known to social services and their child-centred approach means that young people can get support from more than one service at a time and engage at their own pace.

TYS and I-CAN also provide detached youth work in hotspot areas, offering mini-assessments, signposting and referrals for those who are not already engaging with support services. This outreach has been fundamental in identifying those who may need support when transitioning to secondary school and who may need interventions from the education team to re-engage with school.

Alongside the council run services, the local authority commissions Wipers, a youth justice mentoring project, Abianda an organisation specialising in working with girls and young women at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation, St Giles Trust, that

works with young people at risk of involvement in gangs and Chance UK, that works with primary school children. In 2022/2023 these organisations supported over 350 young people. Much of this work involves; one to one contact allowing young people to speak to a mentor about what is happening in their lives, counselling, and support to get involved in positive activities.

Arsenal in the Community is a key provider of youth activities in the borough, delivering football sessions on 12 estates and local parks, qualifications for young people struggling to engage with school and post-16 training courses. In 2022/2023 their football sessions engaged nearly 1,800 young people. Arsenal in the Community's evaluation data suggests that these sessions, which are often based on the estates where the young people live, make the participants feel more connected to their local community and 96% of older participants and 93% of younger participants felt safe during the activities.

6.5.4 Employment support

Arsenal in the Community delivers employability programmes for young people referred by TYS or YJS that focus on CV building, interview techniques and professional standards. They also run the Assist programme and an education programme for those at risk of exclusion in partnership with the City of London Academy at Highbury Grove, providing young people the opportunity to gain an AQA qualification in Football Skills, and OCN qualifications in Understanding Conflict and Leadership Skills.

Working with local businesses, the council's Yes Programme is creating opportunities for NEET 16 to 24 year old young people to gain an understanding of the world of work, through taster sessions and work placements. YES has brokered close to 70 work experience placements for local young people with programme participants going into work.

6.5.5 Partnership Working

Islington Council was generally considered a good place to work, with opportunities for career progression. The consistency of staff has contributed to good working relationships and collaboration between council departments, and statutory and VCS partners. This has led to greater information sharing and joint planning. Practitioners reported that partnership meetings produce a shared sense of accountability for the outcomes. However, this emphasis on collaboration has contributed to the development of a significant number of panels, which some respondents feel may be too many.

Consistency is also evident in some of the community partners, with some delivering activities in the same location with the same staff for over 20 years. These staff members have built up relationships with other local services, residents and young people. The importance of building trust and relationships was seen with one staff member commenting on the importance of providing a human rather than a bureaucratised response.

Part of the council's community empowerment is to take a pragmatic position and be prepared in case there is a serious violent incident. As such, the local authority has a bleed strategy and has an action plan for when a stabbing or other incident of serious youth violence occurs. This includes facilitating a partnership meeting within 4 hours, scanning associates of those involved in the incident to understand who may be immediately impacted and offering support and counselling, to try and mitigate some of the effects that such a traumatising event may have.

Bereaved family members from the Love and Loss group felt that more could be done to support those who are grieving. Many of the family members spoke of living with constant fear and anxiety that something will happen to another loved one and still years after the loss of their son or brother they still find it hard to go out in public. It was acknowledged that grief counselling was offered, however, but often when those grieving are not ready. The family members were also concerned that those providing grief counselling didn't always understand what they were

going through and they found connecting with those who have lived experience more beneficial. Training those who have experienced bereavement to provide more specialist support to others was suggested as a way to better help those grieving. Raising awareness of the pain that serious youth violence causes through talking to groups about their experience gave parents a sense of purpose and was identified as a key part of their healing process.

6.5.6 Community Empowerment?

The council has a recognised and celebrated model of community empowerment with their parent champions, who have run regular webinars on issues such as understanding SEND and the EHCP process, online safety, CAMHS and young people's mental health, grooming, and youth violence to over 700 parents, the implementation of the current strategy seems to be focused on professional delivery.

Community Safety and other teams have a good record of ensuring that residents can voice their concerns through surveys, however empowering residents and people locally embedded in their community to help develop and deliver local plans or address local issues did not feature in the discussions with practitioners.

Relying on a professional rather than a joint professional and resident approach to address local concerns can leave the latter feeling disempowered leading to disengagement. When discussing what would make Islington safer, young people thought that having more activities that enabled them to interact with other young people in the presence of adults, such as sports tournaments and youth clubs would be beneficial. They also thought more adults being visible on the estates where they lived would make their neighbourhood safer. Considering that the presence of adults engaging locally is something that adds to young people's sense of safety, empowering more residents to be involved in local solutions is something that should be explored further.[41]

Youth workers from Arsenal in the Community have worked on these estates for many years and have known several generations of the same families. At times of crisis, following a gang-related fatality for example, they, along with workers from other agencies in Islington, will visit the estate to support families and friends and attempt to head off any retaliatory violence. However, despite talk by some respondents about the co-production of responses to young people in need and in trouble, there are, as yet, no mechanisms for the development of localised gang/violence reduction strategies with the children, young people and adults who live in gang-affected neighbourhoods in the borough.

6.6 Justice and Equality

6.6.1 Youth Crime and Violence

The borough has a strong youth justice record, 85% of those triaged by the Targeted Youth Support this year have been diverted away from offending and there were an average of 40 first time entrants into the youth justice system each year from 2020/2021 to 2020/2023, down from 61 in 2019/2020. In the first two quarters of

41   Alexander, J. (2021). Co-production: fostering greater inclusion or reproducing existing exclusion? An analysis of co-commissioning and resident participation on a South London housing estate. SN Soc Sci 1, 56 https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00058-0

2023/2024, there were 15 first time entrants into the youth justice system with only three reoffending. Over the past year, only 3% of Islington's looked after children have offended, however, 48% of the current YJS caseload is in alternative education provision.

In 2021-2022 St Giles Trust worked with 184 young people around education, training and employment, family life or offending behaviour. During the same period, Wipers worked with 39 vulnerable 11 to 17 year olds helping them to engage better with education and develop their 'hopes, dreams and aspirations'. Chance UK have supported 51 primary school children at risk of anti-social or criminal behaviour and their families, with 100% of parents supported showing increased confidence in their parenting skills.

Islington has low levels of youth custody due to the courts being confident that the Youth Justice Service, which works with under 18s who have committed an offence, has robust processes in place to support young people and keep the public safe, which has reduced the number of young people on remand. However, parents and family members who have lost loved ones to knife crime raised concerns that as perpetrators are often known to the police or social services before a serious incident occurs, more could have been done to prevent them from taking someone's life in the first place.

Levels of under 18 youth violence and serious youth violence recorded by the police in the three months of July to September 2023 were 18% and 35% lower than the same period the previous year, with overall mixed progress in reducing serious youth violence. When compared to pre-Covid levels the year 2022-23 saw a 34% reduction in knife crime offences, a 9% reduction in youth violence and a 2% reduction in Serious Youth Violence. However, from 2021-22 to 2022-23 there was an 11% increase in youth violence and a 4% increase in serious youth violence. With young people stating they would not report incidents to the police, the actual levels of violence in the borough could be higher than what the police records suggest.

6.6.2 Child Criminal Exploitation

Islington's Community Safety Performance Scrutiny report in April 2021, while pointing to reduced levels of serious youth violence and improved reoffending rates, expresses concern about an increase in the criminal exploitation of children and young people during and after the Covid lockdowns as well as the surge in violent youth crime, often involving knives, across London. It also notes that Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) are adapting and becoming more sophisticated. Indeed, recent research in a neighbouring borough reports similar developments, with children as young as eleven being groomed into drug dealing and lured into drug taking by increasingly sophisticated gangs/OCGs.[42]

Child criminal exploitation remains a concern, with 82 young people going missing from care and 114 from family homes in 2022-2023. However, the number of young people involved in County Lines drug dealing could be higher as organised criminal groups are now using children to deal in locations close enough for them to return at night and not be identified as missing.[43]

The council continue to partner with Abianda to provide practice training for staff, 1:1 support for gang affected girls and group work with girls in school settings. Abianda's monitoring data showed that 71% of those they supported felt able to keep themselves safe after the intervention ended and 100% said their knowledge about sexual violence, exploitation and healthy relationships had improved.

To better support those who have potentially been exploited, the local authority has taken on devolved responsibility for National Referral Mechanism (NRM) decision-making integrating this into their wider safeguarding processes. Decisions on whether a young person is being exploited are now much quicker than when they were being made by the National Crime Agency.

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42   Andell P. (2023) Co-production in Addressing Child Criminal Exploitation in Waltham Forest, Project Report. University of Suffolk, Ipswich, UK

43   Andell, P., & Pitts, J. (2018). The end of the line? The impact of county lines drug distribution on youth crime in a target destination. Youth and Policy. https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/the-end-of-the-line/

Progress, Opportunities and Areas for Development

7.1 The Context

The context in which the local authority and its partners have operated over the past few years has been increasingly difficult. Covid lockdowns, followed by the cost of living crisis, have put significant extra pressure on resources at a time when budgets are being cut. The cost of living crisis has heightened the financial strain on households, which will lead some young people to feel the need to find alternative forms of income generation, increasing their chances of engaging in criminal activity such as drug dealing. At the same time, the nature of youth violence is evolving, something that was once almost synonymous with gang activity is now becoming more random, and the threshold for when someone uses a weapon has lowered. Now many of those involved in violent incidents were not previously known to the police. As such, interventions that focus on targeting those associated with gangs may not adequately recognise the risks that other young people may face.

Changes in the way criminal groups are exploiting young people and the increase in young people not involved in gang activity becoming involved in violence have made serious youth violence less predictable. As a result, London boroughs face particular problems that require specific responses and although concerns around the safety of young people remain, it was clear throughout this evaluation that significant progress is being achieved in the delivery of the current youth safety strategy. This work provides a strong platform on which to build as the council looks to develop the support offered further.

7.2 Review of Progress towards Delivering the Current Strategy

There is a strong commitment to early intervention and simplifying access to support across the council and its partners. Informing this approach is a focus on becoming data led to identify and address the underlying issues that may be contributing to a young person's increased risk of experiencing violence. The progress made has been enhanced by a relatively low staff turnover rate in the borough, which has allowed strong working relationships to develop. When compared to 2019,

there have been reductions in first time entrants into the youth justice system and 85% of those supported through YJS triage have not gone on to offend. Levels of serious youth violence are down when compared with 2019, however, there have been year on year increases since the lockdown period ended. Likewise, child criminal exploitation remains a concern with almost 200 young people going missing in 2022-2023, however, the number of young people exploited could be higher. In 2021, Islington Council in partnership with Camden Council took devolved responsibility for local NRM decision making, which has significantly decreased the time from referral to conclusive outcome.

The local authority has invested heavily in Children's Services, which has contributed to the continuity of staff and the ability to develop remarkable partnerships directed towards particular issues and support needs. For example, ASIP is providing a collaborative response to families where young people are on the edge of going into care. This work has helped young people to stay out of care helping to reduce the borough's looked after children by 26%.

Young people are also benefiting from the embedding of mental health staff within services such as TYS, YJS and I-CAN, enabling young people to access mental health support whilst waiting for CAMHS and Adult Mental Health Services. This support has been especially important for those transitioning to adult services, which were described as unsuitable for many young people.

Commissioned services such as Abianda, Wipers and Chance UK have helped provide mentoring and specialist intervention to young people at risk of exploitation or involvement in criminal activity.

iTIPS is supporting teachers and youth workers to understand how to respond to the trauma behind the actions of young people, and there is anecdotal evidence that schools are starting to consider how to support rather than simply discipline a pupil's problematic behaviour. New River College's outreach programme which

supports pupils at risk of exclusion, is helping young people remain in mainstream education. TYS' transition service continues to identify and support young people who may have difficulty coping as they start secondary school, through both helping young people become more resilient and advocating around their specific support needs. The iTIPS rollout, the New River College outreach programme and the transition service have coincided with a reduction in permanent exclusions, and although there is not enough evidence to confirm a direct correlation, more supportive attitudes to managing discipline should contribute to schools becoming more inclusive.

The model of equipping front line staff to identify potential concerns, and then offer support directly or help parents and/or children to access specialist services is proving effective within the borough's Bright Start programme. Basing CAMHS staff in family hubs and schools to work alongside early years practitioners has led to SEMH concerns being identified earlier and has helped to address the underrepresentation of Somali children being referred to CAMHS. There is the opportunity to replicate this model elsewhere by both equipping frontline staff with knowledge of how to provide additional support and having more practitioners based within the community providing direct access to specialised support.

There is also the opportunity to develop more co-produced community led youth safety projects. There was very little resident involvement in the activities discussed in this evaluation. Just as frontline workers could be upskilled, residents could be trained to work alongside youth workers and other practitioners to provide neighbourhood based support based on local knowledge and building lasting relationships. This approach would require an investment into its coordination, a clear understanding of its function and limitations, alongside an agreed memorandum of understanding around data sharing and a consideration for how power dynamics within professional cultures influence participation. The general focus of the strategy has been to improve individualised support for young people, however many of the risks young people face are locational. Investing in improving the capacity of people from neighbourhoods to address local issues, will help provide more contextual interventions, which will benefit groups as well as individuals.

The monitoring of progress towards the current strategy's KPIs have shown that a significant amount of action has been taken to improve youth safety, however, it was not always clear what the impact of this activity was. For example, the monitoring of engagement with iTIPS is important, however, this information doesn't speak to any subsequent policy of practice change, which would indicate impact. Similarly, the number of young people engaged and hours of support provided by commissioned services do not identify the impact that these interventions have on the wellbeing and behaviour of those supported. Introducing a monitoring programme that helps to identify impact alongside measuring output and outcomes will help the council assess the effectiveness of future strategies and work programmes.

Although commitment to 'early intervention' was evident throughout the evaluation, there was no universal understanding of what 'early intervention' meant. Some understood this to refer to identifying need and helping children and families access interventions at the earliest opportunity preferably in a child's early years. Others understood it to mean helping young people once statutory services have been involved in some way, such as when a child is arrested, to prevent a further escalation of problematic behaviour. Whilst the latter may be helpful, such crisis incidents often occur precisely because a young person wasn't supported earlier and as such although any interventions offered may be diversionary and preventative, whether this is 'early intervention' should be questioned.

Notwithstanding participation in the iTIPS programme, professionals expressed concern over the lack of engagement by schools with processes to improve youth safety. Some secondary schools clearly have very inclusive polices and will start work with pupils in year 6 to ensure that support is in place for when they transition to year 7. In these schools, behavioural issues trigger a support response, which often includes working in partnership with specialist agencies. However, many schools are still relying too much of disciplinary processes to address behaviour that indicate that a pupil has unmet needs. Staff from the local authority commented that it was often difficult to get schools to respond to requests and some schools' disciplinary policies were identified as problematic to an inclusive and supportive ethos that the council was trying to promote. Although progress has been made on permanent exclusions, the suspension rate has increased for both primary and secondary schools and there are concerns that some schools are remaining overly punitive. This does suggest a reluctance on the part of some schools to consider how modifying their approach may reduce the risks their pupils face.

The focus on particular hotspots by Community Safety makes operational sense, particularly if resources are stretched. However, this targeting could contribute to disproportionate responses within certain neighbourhoods and the overrepresentation of certain communities within criminal justice services.

Funding was identified as a concern for most professionals interviewed. Short term competitive funding cycles left many service providers focusing on how to keep their activities going rather than planning for the long term. Both council and VCS staff were expecting cuts to their budgets in the coming year. The subsequent reduced capacity was predicted to increase waiting times for and reduce the flexibility of specialist interventions, some of which were already funded to address issues in the availability of other services. Support becoming more targeted was being considered as a potential response, however, there is a danger that this could delay support for some young people.

The cuts to adult mental health services despite the increased need post Covid, has left family and early help support services spending more time supporting parents delaying the planned direct work with the child(ren) for which the original referral

was made. As a result, these interventions are becoming more reactive rather than focusing on achieving long term positive outcomes.

The increase in SEMH referrals is a challenge for CAMHS, schools and the council's youth support services. CAMHS waiting times are already substantially longer than when the strategy was developed and there are concerns that the additional capacity to provide interim support within services such as TYS and ICAN will not be able to meet the demand. Most referrals to CAMHS are still made for secondary school pupils, suggesting that these needs are being identified later than they should be. Delays in referrals and long waiting times mean that many young people go through most of their childhood without their SEMH needs being understood or met.

Despite ASIP helping to reduce the number of young people going into care, demand for semi-independent housing is outstripping the supply. The use of less than suitable accommodation that puts young people at greater risk of involvement in criminal activity and being exploited is a concern.

In many respects, the local authority is grappling with a social problem largely caused by structural issues that make particular groups of young people vulnerable to exposure to violence. The vast majority of the interventions discussed here sought to provide individualised contextual responses, based on the premise of early intervention, investing significantly in ensuring young people have access to the support they need. Although young people are clearly benefiting from this work, the wider context in which young people do not feel safe has at best remained unchanged.

7.3 Can Contextual Safeguarding Help?

Contextual safeguarding (CS) aims to provide a model for intervening when children and young people experience, or are at risk of, harassment, abuse, exploitation or assault outside the family. These 'extra familial' harms include pressure to become involved in unwanted sexual or criminal behaviour, online grooming and

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recruitment into County Lines drug dealing. The framework was originally developed by Professor Carlene Firmin and her colleagues at the University of Bedfordshire.[44] It was introduced into the government's Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance in 2018. Contextual Safeguarding has subsequently been incorporated into local authority and voluntary sector safeguarding policies across the country.

> **The contextual safeguarding framework identifies five locations in which a child or young person may be at risk:**
> - The child's home and family
> - The peer group
> - The school
> - The neighbourhood
> - The online environment

CS maintains that in the past, safeguarding interventions have focussed primarily upon interactions between a child or young person and their family, regardless of where the harm originated. However, this approach proved inadequate in cases where neither the parents nor their social workers were able to control the actions of the extra-familial perpetrators of harm or to affect the social contexts in which the harm occurred.

This is why the proponents of CS have adopted what they describe as a 'two-tier approach'. The first tier builds on the intra-familial work that safeguarding professionals have traditionally undertaken with children, young people and their families but introduces considerations of extra-familial factors which pose a risk or are causing harm, to the young person. These extra-familial risks are identified and targeted in the Care Plan, which alerts members of a second tier, the multi-agency safeguarding partnership, to the problem.

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44   Firmin C. (2015). Peer on peer abuse: safeguarding implications of contextualising abuse between young people within social fields: PhD. Thesis, Luton: University of Bedfordshire; Firmin C. (2020). Contextual Safeguarding and Child Protection: Rewriting the Rules, London, Routledge

The safeguarding partnership would normally comprise relevant local authority departments, educational institutions, third sector agencies and, probably, the police. Depending upon the nature of the problem, these partnerships might also involve retailers, transport providers, and members of local communities. The Contextual Safeguarding framework is designed to enable members of the safeguarding partnership to intervene in the extra-familial settings to bring abusive behaviour to an end or prevent the threats to the child or young person from being realised.

However, these interventions are not intended to simply focus on one individual or one family. Rather, by intervening successfully, it is hoped that a safeguarding partnership comprising a minimum sufficient network of people and organisations that is aware of the risks knows how to report them, and is ready to intervene when and where necessary, will be able to protect all similarly affected young people.

However, a recent study of attempts to introduce CS in one London borough raises questions about its present viability.[45] The research team found that while managers had embraced CS as a progressive innovation, overstretched frontline workers had conflicting views about whether or not parental capacity should be their key focus. Some senior managers felt that frontline workers wished to maintain a focus on parental capacity because it was simpler than a CS approach and that intra-family intervention was central to a professional culture which was resistant to change. However, it was clear that, for their part, the social workers were under significant pressure from complex child protection cases and growing caseloads.

The researchers found that working with other agencies in a multi-agency partnership was not always easy. The police are important members of these partnerships but were sometimes seen by social workers as holding "challenging perspectives" on the exploitation of young people, sometimes regarding them as complicit in their own 'abuse'.

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45   Wilson N. Diaz C. & Usubillaga J. (2022) Implementing the contextual safeguarding approach: a study in one local authority. Journal of Children's Services 17 (3) , pp. 221-236.

The researchers observed that social care innovations need substantial lead-in time to achieve enhanced services[46] and that this can lead to a loss of momentum. However, although there was enthusiasm amongst some research respondents to implement the CS approach, they also pointed to a paucity of resources with which to embed it. Unsurprisingly a major reason cited for this was the impact of successive cuts to local authority, police and voluntary sector budgets over the preceding decade. Moreover, youth services which, on the face of it, would be a fundamental building block of any effective CS partnership have suffered a 73% real-terms funding cut since 2010.[47] Islington is one of the few local areas in the country that has protected youth service budgets.[48]

CS proceeds from a particular case of extra-familial abuse or exploitation which, where necessary, is referred upwards to a multi-agency network that as the researchers observed, may often be composed of under-funded, understaffed, under-resourced and overworked, agencies and organisations with different powers, different priorities and divergent perceptions of the nature of the problem.

To date, the focus of most UK interventions with street gangs and child criminal exploitation (CCE) have been similarly individualistic. These individualised responses to the problem may contain some young people and help others but there is no evidence that they can change the nature and degree of exploitation, violence and abuse in gang-affected neighbourhoods.

Often, the 'problem' presented to the multi-agency partnership may be just another instance of the embedded modus operandi of groups whose raison d'etre is the exploitation and abuse of vulnerable young people. In 2006 in Waltham Forest, established gangs were routinely coercing young people in particular neighbourhoods to traffic drugs for them.[49] Sixteen years later these same gangs, targeting these same neighbourhoods, were still routinely coercing young people to traffic drugs for them.[50] Many of the animosities between these gangs remained the same and were periodically re-enacted in the same places.

46   Lefebvre, J.-I., Montani, F., & Courcy, F. (2020). Self-Compassion and Resilience at Work: A Practice-Oriented Review. Advances in Developing Human Resources, 22(4), 437-452. https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422320949145
47   YMCA (2022) Devalued: A Decade of Cuts to Youth Services, London, YMCA
48   Berry, S (2021) London's Youth Service Cuts 2011-21: A Blighted Generation, City Hall Green
49   Pitts J. (2008) Reluctant Gangsters: The Changing Face of Youth Crime, London, Routledge
50   Andell P. (2023) Co-production in Addressing Child Criminal Exploitation in Waltham Forest, Project Report. University of Suffolk, Ipswich, UK.

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Contextual Safeguarding may well be on the right track but what is needed here is more than a referral to a multi-agency network which may or may not be able to do something about a particular instance of exploitation or abuse. An effective response would require a 'joined-up' strategy pursued over time by a dedicated team of professionals from relevant agencies and a shared commitment to the eradication of these practices in what research has established are the dangerous places.

7.4 From 'Who Done It' to 'Where Done It

Research indicates that crime and disorder is concentrated in relatively few places in a town or city, suggesting that to reduce crime we should focus more on where crime and violence occur.[51] Faced with the criticism that a focus on these 'hotspots' means that the crime will be displaced somewhere else, Weisburd and his colleagues argue that crime hotspots have features that make them particularly conducive to criminal activity. And this means the geographical and social patterning of violent crime is relatively easy to predict. In London, for example, violent crime clusters in a small number of the more deprived areas and those with a large night-time economy or in public spaces. It is also the case that these are the areas that tend to experience the sharpest increases in violent crime, when and where this occurs.[52] Research by Massey[53] reveals that over two thirds (69%) of Knife homicides in London in 2017/2018 occurred in just 67 (1.4%) of all 4835 Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in London (LSOAs normally comprise between 400 and 1,200 households with a resident population of between 1,000 and 3,000 persons). Massey found that the risk of homicide was 1,400% higher in the hottest spots of knife assaults than in the coolest spots.

For a place-based violence reduction strategy to work there will need to be a consideration into how the multi agency partnership, a core feature of Contextual Safeguarding, could be made to work most effectively.

51   Weisburd D. (ed. 2023) Place Matters Criminology for the Twenty-first Century, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
52   Sutherland A. Brunton-Smith I. Hutt O. & Bradford B. (2020) Violent crime in London: trends, trajectories and neighbourhoods, The College of Policing
53   Massey J. (et al) (2019) Forecasting Knife Homicide Risk from Prior Knife Assaults in 4835 Local Areas of London, 2016–2018. Cambridge Journal of Evidence-Based Policing https://doi.org/10.1007/s41887-019-00034-y

7.5 Multi-agency Partnerships that Work

Atkinson's study,[54] based on 30 multi-agency initiatives with children and families found the major challenges to effectiveness were:

- Roles and responsibilities,
- Competing priorities,
- Communication,
- Funding and resources,
- Professional and agency cultures.

He found that communication was most difficult at a strategic level and least difficult in co-located operational teams. Similarly, conflicting professional and agency cultures were more of a problem at the strategic rather than the operational level.

Van Staden et. al.[55] in their Home Office study of multi-agency partnerships dealing with organised crime found that partnerships were effective if they identified the partners that could play a purposeful role at a local level. It was therefore necessary to identify:

- Which aspects of the problem each agency was best equipped to address
- Their respective powers and responsibilities
- The benefits, both professional and fiscal, that they would gain by virtue of their involvement in the partnership

Atkinson also found that:

> *'a vital sine qua non for successful interagency collaboration' was the presence of a new type of 'hybrid' professional with experience in and knowledge of a range of agencies and, in particular, an understanding of their cultures, structures, discourses and priorities.*

54   Atkinson (et al 2007) https://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/mad01/mad01.pdf
55   Van Staden L. Leahy-Harland S. & Gottschalk E. (2011) Tackling organised crime through a partnership approach at the local level: a process evaluation Home Office Report 56, London, Home Office

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Research by Brand & Ollerenshaw[56] in the UK suggests that gang strategies are successful to the extent that those commissioning them are able to exert control or influence over:

- The integration and empowerment of community members into the strategy
- The credibility and capacity of the strategy
- The coordination of the strategy
- The commissioning of the strategy
- The review of the strategy
- The targeting of local interventions

Yet the term 'partnership' has many different meanings. To achieve greater clarity about what 'partnership' might mean Himmelman[57] developed what he calls a Four Stage Model of 'Collaboration'.

56   Brand A. & Ollerenshaw R. (2009) Gangs at the Grass Roots: Community Solutions to Street Violence, London, the New Local Government Network
57   Himmelman A. (1996) Helping Each Other Help Others: Principles and Practices of Collaboration, ARCH Factsheet Number25. ARCH National Resource Center For Crisis Nurseries and Respite Care Services, North Carolina State Dept. of Human Resources, Raleigh.Div. of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services.

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	Networking	Coordination	Cooperation	Collaboration
				Enhancing each other's capacity for mutual benefit
			Sharing Resources	Sharing Resources
		Altering activities/ ways of working to achieve a common purpose	Altering activities/ ways of working to achieve a common purpose	Altering activities/ ways of working to achieve a common purpose
	Exchanging information for mutual benefit	Exchanging information for mutual benefit	Exchanging information for mutual benefit	Exchanging information for mutual benefit

Networking involves exchanging information for mutual benefit and requires a relatively low level of trust and co-ordination between partners. Contacts are usually informal, person-to-person, rather than organisation-to-organisation. However, this level of partnership is central to success at the other levels because it involves a *'continuing dialogue of mutual benefit'* between people who are actually 'doing the job'.

Coordination involves both the exchange of information and agreement between the partners to alter their activities or ways of working to achieve a common purpose. Coordination aims to solve problems of fragmentation, overlap and duplication in services.

Cooperation also involves, exchanging information and coordinating activities but requires that organisations also share resources; including money, staffing and buildings.

Collaboration involves all of the above but also focuses on collaborators working together to ensure that the agencies and professionals with responsibility for different parts of a problem or task produce a coherent and cohesive 'system' in which the service user, or client, receives a service tailored to their needs risks and aspirations.

7.6 A Collaborative Approach to Gang Related Violence Reduction

In the mid-1990s leading figures in US gang research produced a summary of the evidence of the effectiveness of gang intervention.[58] Their survey integrated the findings of research conducted in 45 towns and cities. This formed the basis of their influential five point Comprehensive Gangs Model of effective, evidence-based, interventions.

The survey found that 'the interaction of the strategies of community organization and opportunities provision' was the single strongest predictor of programme effectiveness. Strategies of suppression and social intervention were common to all of the cities in the survey, and the survey team viewed them as essential for dealing with the youth gang problem effectively. However, success was more likely when community organization and opportunities provision strategies were also present.

The second most significant predictor was, inter-agency collaboration; 'the proportion of local respondents networking with each other in a city to address the youth gang problem'. Together, these two predictors accounted for almost 60% of the variance between programmes deemed to be effective or ineffective.

7.6.1 Operation Ceasefire

Perhaps the most influential model of gang violence reduction in the UK was Operation Ceasefire launched in Boston USA in 1996. Operation Ceasefire drew upon the Comprehensive Gang Model,[59] to bring together practitioners, researchers and local people, including gang members, in gang-affected neighbourhoods, to undertake an assessment of the youth homicide problem and devise a solution to it.

Recognising the suspicion and hostility that many local people felt towards the police, prior to launching the intervention, officers spent months working with

58 pergel I, Chance R, Ehrensaft K, Regulus T, Kane C, Laseter R, Alexander A, Oh S (1994) Gang Suppression and Intervention: Community Models Research Summary Washington DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
59 Spergel I, Chance R, Ehrensaft K, Regulus T, Kane C, Laseter R, Alexander A, Oh S (1994) Gang Suppression and Intervention: Community Models Research Summary Washington DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

community groups to improve local services and enhance youth provision. Having done this, they proceeded to implement a 'focused deterrence strategy', harnessing a multitude of different agencies plus resources from within the community. The objective of Operation Ceasefire was simple enough, it aimed to save lives and reduce serious injury. In Boston's gang affected neighbourhoods, certain proscribed behaviours, like possession or use of knives and firearms, harassment and serious assaults, would trigger highly publicised multi-agency crackdowns by organisations with enforcement responsibilities.

This was an approach which, initially, placed the police at the front and centre of the initiative. Describing the programme, the researcher Anthony Braga,[60] noted that:

> *This approach involved deterring chronic gang offenders violence by reaching out directly to gangs, saying explicitly that violence would no longer be tolerated, and backing that message by pulling every lever legally available when violence occurred.*[61]

Operation Ceasefire brought local people, including gang members, together with police, welfare, education and employment professionals and researchers, to undertake an assessment of the youth homicide problem and plan a response. It did not aim to 'smash' gangs, although defection from gangs was a side effect of the initiative. The strategy involved Co-ordinated Leverage on Gangs through highly publicised multi-agency crackdowns, partnership with the housing, probation, parole and the vehicle licensing authorities, that could impose sanctions; making it clear that such enforcement would be triggered by certain specified behaviours like possession or use of knives and firearms, harassment and serious assaults.

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60   Braga A. Kennedy D. Waring E. & Piehl A. (2001) Problem-Oriented Policing, Deterrence, and Youth Violence: An Evaluation of Boston's Operation Ceasefire, Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 38(3): 195-225.
61   Braga A. Kennedy D. Waring E. & Piehl A. (2001) Problem-Oriented Policing, Deterrence, and Youth Violence: An Evaluation of Boston's Operation Ceasefire, Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 38(3): 195-225.

> *... it was crucial to deliver a credible deterrence message to Boston gangs. Therefore, Operation Ceasefire only targeted those gangs engaged in violent behavior, rather than wasting resources on those that were not.*[62]

However, Operation Ceasefire also endeavoured to 'enhance community relations' to secure the support of local residents for the crackdowns; to engage gang members, in order to elicit information and transmit consistent messages. It also entered partnerships with social welfare, youth work, education and careers services that could provide alternative futures for gang-involved young people who desisted from violent crime.

The Ceasefire deterrence strategy was personalised; communicated to a relatively small audience of Boston's gang-involved youths rather than all the young people in the neighbourhood. The Ceasefire Working Group believed that face-to-face communication with gang members would undercut any feelings of anonymity and invulnerability they might have, and that a clear demonstration of interagency solidarity would enhance offenders' sense that something new and powerful was about to happen.

7.6.2 The Centrality of Youth Work

Taken together, the research and evaluations of the projects cited point to the need for continuing, and sometimes protracted, involvement of youth work professionals with gangs, gang-involved and gang-affected young people, and adults, in order to divert would-be 'gangsters', promote the desistance of those who are deeply involved in gang culture, prevent sexual violence and exploitation and build the capacity of local residents to 'reclaim' their neighbourhoods from the gang and the predatory groups exploiting young people. This process can be facilitated by

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62   Reed, W. & Decker S. (2002) Responding to Gangs: Evaluation and Research, Research Gate

youth and community workers who would initiate a programme of what, in the USA, is known as Community Organisation. Community Organisation involves building consortia and helping the agencies, organisations and schools within them to decide which aspects of the local gang problem they were best equipped to deal with. Community organisers would then identify gaps where local authority resources might be used to develop a comprehensive, scaled, service in which different kinds of services would be delivered to young people with different levels of involvement in, or who were differentially affected by gangs. Beyond this, the consortia, supported by youth and community workers, could also serve as a base for a community development/capacity building strategy in the gang-affected neighbourhoods.

An analysis of the impact of Operation Ceasefire's by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, which began in 1996, concluded that the programme had been responsible for a fall in youth homicides from an average of 44 per annum between 1991 and 1995 to 26 in 1996 and 15 in 1997; a downward trend which continued until 1999. However, with a change in project staff, and project philosophy, which resulted in the social intervention elements of the programme being abandoned, gang related youth homicides began to climb again, reaching 37 in 2005 and peaking at 52 in 2010.

7.6.3 Ceasefire in Manchester

Manchester Multi Agency Gang Strategy (MMAGS) was launched in 2001, on the basis of research undertaken by Karen Bullock & Nick Tilley.[63] Bullock & Tilley had spent time in Boston observing the implementation of Operation Ceasefire and ascertaining whether a similar approach might be relevant in the UK. Their research in Manchester was based on intelligence compiled by Greater Manchester Police and interviews with former and current 'gang members'. This confirmed that much of the armed violence in the city was, associated with the defence of drug dealing territories. The study revealed that between April 2001 and March 2002, South Manchester gangs were responsible for 11 fatal shootings; 84 serious woundings

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63   Bullock K. & Tilley N. (2017) Shootings, Gangs and Violent Incidents in Manchester: Developing a Crime Reduction Strategy, Research Gate (November)

and 639 other incidents of violence involving firearms. It also showed that most of the perpetrators and victims were teenagers. These shootings were highly localised. Of those recorded in 1999, for example, 68% were in the two main gang-affected neighbourhoods in South Manchester. Of the 46 gun crime victims identified in the study, 30 lived in these two areas, where, in the second half of 1999, there were six gang related murders in five months. It also emerged that many of the perpetrators of gun crime had also been victims of gun crime.

MMAGS was a partnership between the Police, the Probation Service, the Youth Offending Service, the Education Authority, Housing, Social Services and the Youth Service. Based on the Boston (USA) Operation Ceasefire model, MMAGS employed a group of full-time staff seconded from the police, youth service, education and probation, who offered diversionary, educational, recreational and vocational activities to young people in, or on the fringes of, youth gangs. They worked with up to 75 individuals at any one time, mostly aged between 10 and 25. Participation in the programme was mainly voluntary, however, some youngsters were required to cooperate with MMAGS as a condition of a court order or licence. The project also ran sessions in schools and youth centres on issues such as gang culture, firearms legislation and peer pressure.

MMAGS made contacted young people through:

- Referrals from partner agencies
- Referrals from other agencies
- Outreach by detached youth workers in gang-affected neighbourhoods
- Youth liaison officers who coordinated school/club programmes
- Self-referral/direct contact with young people.

When a young person entered the programme the team undertook an assessment with them to ascertain the type of diversionary programme that would meet their needs and gain their interest. The ensuing Intervention Action Plan (IAP) could involve several agencies (e.g. schools, social ser-vices, housing and the probation service) working together to deliver the programme components.

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Although MMAGS was a statutory agency its steering group was composed of community members and met regularly with Mothers Against Violence, CARISMA, Victim Support and several other local voluntary sector organizations.

In its first 12 months of operation MMAGS made contact with over 200 young people and during this time, only 10 per cent of its "target list", composed of gang-involved young people, re-offended, suggesting that those who engaged with MMAGS were likely to renounce gang criminali-ty. However, as is often the case, although the MMAGS diversionary programmes appeared to be effective with programme participants, gang-related gun crime in South Manchester continued un-abated.

7.6.4 The Manchester Integrated Gangs Management System

Until 2007, when a firearms incident occurred, the practice was for the police to flood the streets with officers, stopping and searching anybody who fitted the profile of a likely perpetrator. This meant that many uninvolved Black young people in the area would be stopped and searched and this had the perverse effect of maximising resentment while minimising the flow of intelligence. However, research suggested that the proliferation of street gangs was achieved via the recruitment of younger siblings and their associates at the bottom end and ready access to guns and Class A drugs at the other. As a result, MMAGs and the Greater Manchester Police decided upon an alternative strategy.

In 2007 Greater Manchester Police launched Operation Couger with a team of one inspector, two sergeants and 15 constables. Whereas in earlier operations, police who had no previous contact with gang involved young people were deployed, the Couger team set out to identify gang involved young people and to introduce themselves to them on the streets. The teams went out on patrol every evening covering the 'corners' where gang-involved young people were hanging out. They adopted a policy of never driving past a suspect but always stopping and talking to them. This had the effect of reducing the numbers of firearms that were being carried on the street.

The early success of Couger spawned what came to be called the XCalibre Gangs Unit which in partnership with MMAGS became the Manchester Integrated Gangs Management System. XCalibre had three elements; a small squad which focused on Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) supplying firearms and Class A drugs to gangs; a critical incident team that investigated gang-related shootings and the Xcalibre taskforce. The Xcalibre Taskforce continued with the strategy developed by Operation COUGAR with the additional element that if they found younger siblings or their associates, sometimes as young as eight, on the 'corners', they assumed that they were vulnerable to gang involvement, and hence 'at risk', and would therefore take them home and issue their parents with a Statement of Concern. This would also trigger a multi-agency case conference, including representatives from education, health, Probation, the Youth Offending Team and the local Safeguarding Board, to consider the vulnerability of gang-involved young people their siblings and associates and to put in place a relevant social intervention.

An early sign of success for this new strategy came in the summer of 2008 when Excalibur recorded the longest gap between firearms discharges, from mid-February to July, since 1990. This coincided with the sentencing of members of the Gooch Close gang which demonstrated that gang-related offending would attract far more severe sentences. Together, these two factors appeared to be having a marked impact on behaviour on the streets. Excalibur also utilised Facebook and other social networking sites to discover who was gang-involved and so, as intelligence built, it was no longer possible for gang-involved young people to deny their involvement.

As a result of these changes, there was a recognition in gang affected communities that things had improved and this has resulted in increased information flow. In Hulme and Moss Side, community advisory groups were established and when the police mounted a raid they would tell members of these groups who would explain to other local residents what was happening and why.

In 2000 there were three gang-related murders and 47 firearms discharges in gang-affected neighbourhoods in South Manchester. In 2016 there were no gang-related murders and no firearms discharges in these neighbourhoods.

7.7 Towards a Comprehensive Multi-agency Gang Strategy

What follows is a round-up of the key features of successful youth violence reductions programmes/projects/strategies.

Shared Ownership and Leadership: The study of gang intervention programmes, undertaken for the US Department of Justice Office for Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) described above[64] found that gangs become a chronic problem in communities where key organizations are inadequately integrated and sufficient resources are not available to target gang-involved youth.

Field visits suggested certain common elements associated with reducing the youth gang problem. These included:

> *clear and forthright recognition of a youth gang problem. Proactive leadership by representatives of significant criminal justice and community-based agencies in order to mobilise political and community interests.[65]*

This mobilization created both formal and informal networks of criminal justice and other personnel involved with the problem. Additionally:

> *... those in principal roles developed a consensus on a definition of the problem (e.g., gang, gang incident), specific targets of agency and interagency effort, and on reciprocal interrelated strategies.[66]*

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64   Spergel I, Chance R, Ehrensaft K, Regulus T, Kane C, Laseter R, Alexander A, Oh S (1994) Gang Suppression and Intervention: Community Models Research Summary Washington DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

65   Spergel I, Chance R, Ehrensaft K, Regulus T, Kane C, Laseter R, Alexander A, Oh S (1994) Gang Suppression and Intervention: Community Models Research Summary Washington DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

66   Spergel I, Chance R, Ehrensaft K, Regulus T, Kane C, Laseter R, Alexander A, Oh S (1994) Gang Suppression and Intervention: Community Models Research Summary Washington DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Operationally this meant, especially in chronic gang problem areas, that a multi-disciplinary approach evolved. As a result, strategies of suppression, social intervention, organizational development, and especially social opportunities were mobilized in a collective fashion on a community basis. Finally, it appeared that a successful approach had to be guided, not only by concern for safeguarding the community against youth gang depredations, but for providing support and supervision to present and potential gang members in a way that contributed to their personal development.

This suggests that a prerequisite of success is that local citizens and organizations will be 'involved in a common enterprise … working as a team. This is important because to remain anchored in day-to-day reality, and to achieve the necessary credibility, the initiative must have representation from, and ready access to, local young people and adults caught up in the gang problem. It is important therefore that such involvement goes beyond tokenism since the evidence suggests that genuine participation supported by local politicians can reduce crime and violence in the poorest neighbourhoods.

Engagement with Gang Members: In Boston and Manchester project workers utilised outreach methods to make contact with gang members on the street and offer them programmes that targeted their needs and created viable routes out of gangs. In its Ending Gang and Youth Violence: Community Engagement (2014) the Home Office notes that:

> *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[67]*

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67   Home Office (2014) Ending Gang and Youth Violence: Community Engagement, London, Home Office

However, if the partnership is to flourish, it will be important that the initiative is not perceived as being located solely or primarily within the criminal justice system or in an organisation concerned primarily with crime reduction/prevention, since this may well deter participation by would-be community activists and young people who are, or have been, involved in gang activity. Moreover, as the recent MOPAC Youth survey suggests, perceived criminal justice connections might well provoke a negative response from those young people targeted by the initiative. Indeed, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee on Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System (2006-7) and Dying to Belong (2009) from the Centre for Social Justice, a ground breaking report on youth gangs in the UK both observe that the success of gang desistance programmes appears to be related to their clients' perceptions of whether or not they are solely a criminal justice initiative.

Neighbourhood Capacity Building: William Julius Wilson[68] has shown that one of the effects of social fragmentation in the poorest neighbourhoods is to undermine residents' capacity to act collectively to draw down much needed resources. In Boston, police officers were often instrumental in galvanising public services into action and developing social, sporting and recreational provision. This had the important effect of generating support for the crackdowns on proscribed behaviours. For the police in Boston, a longer-term objective was to garner the types of information from the community that would allow them to develop tightly targeted, intelligence-led, interventions. But for this to happen, residents must feel that the authorities can offer them sufficient protection for as long as the threat persists. Thus, good community relations are ultimately predicated on the perceived fairness and sustainability of police involvement in such an initiative.

Neighbourhood capacity building utilises existing social networks to connect with neighbourhood residents with in-depth knowledge of their area, its inhabitants, and the problems they confront. It endeavours to enable people to exert greater

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68   Wilson N. Diaz C. & Usubillaga J. (2022) Implementing the contextual safeguarding approach: a study in one local authority. Journal of Children's Services 17 (3) , pp. 221-236.

control over the policies affecting their neighbourhood and the practices of the professionals within it by equipping them with the relevant knowledge and skills, while opening-up access to the places where key decisions affecting them and their neighbourhoods are made. Residents in gang-affected neighbourhoods are often fearful for their children and themselves and this is why they are often unwilling to come forward as witnesses when violent crimes are committed.

Nonetheless, following a serious assault on an estate in East London, parents, with the support of their Housing Association, started a project called Reclaiming our Estate, Reclaiming Our Children, involving discussion with the police, the local authority and children and young people on the estate, some of whom were gang-involved, about residents' attitudes to violent behaviour and how a safer neighbourhood might be achieved. In some areas, Police Safer Neighbourhood Teams have been the lead agency in encouraging local people to express their concerns. However, for local people to give unequivocal messages to gang-involved young people and information about gang activity to the police and other agencies, both key elements of the successful Operation Ceasefire in Boston, Massachusetts they must have confidence that those agencies are prepared to remain involved until the threat has abated, and also that police powers will be used fairly. Many residents also feel blamed for the problems of which they are in fact the victims, feeling that their voices are unheard in the places where key decisions about their plight are made. This would suggest that the, high profile, involvement of local politicians acting as advocates for people in gang-affected neighbourhoods, could be central to the success of any such initiative.

Family Support: Culturally relevant family support is a central prop of initiatives to reduce violent youth crime. Many parents whose children are gang involved or gang affected feel unable to exert the care, control and influence they would wish and this often engenders a sense of inadequacy which can, in turn, undermine their coping capacities. This can lead to family conflict and in some cases young people may vacate, or be 'thrown out' of, their homes' These parents need support, yet statutory support for the parents is usually only forthcoming if they are made the subjects of a, potentially stigmatising, order that that can be enforced by a court.

The House of Commons Committee on Black Young People and the Criminal Justice System (2006-7), recommended that statutory agencies made greater use of third sector organisations that offer parenting programmes and, in particular, Black voluntary, community and faith organisations. However, for this to become a reality, it will be necessary to build the capacity of these groups and organisations. Where they are effective, these organisations tend to have built from the 'bottom up' offering non-stigmatising, culturally relevant, support to parents under pressure. Support from the clergy may also be regarded by recipients as less stigmatising and more acceptable because of their religious and spiritual, as distinct from statutory, affiliations.

Monitoring & Evaluation: In order to steer and develop an initiative with gang-involved and gang-affected young people, independent monitoring and evaluation of interventions and their impact is important. However, it is now fairly widely accepted that modes of research and evaluation utilised extensively in the justice system in recent years, which measure only inputs and outputs but reveal little about how and why change occurs are of little use to service users, policy-makers, managers or practitioners. Moreover, there is growing evidence that applied research, also known as 'action research' and 'realistic evaluation' (cf Pawson & Tilley 1997), is most effective where service users, managers and practitioners feel they have some ownership of the research process. By involving these 'activists' it becomes possible to discover not just whether a particular intervention 'works' or not, but how and why it works and whether, and if so how, the lessons learned might be generalised to other settings. A further advantage of this approach is that it can allow service users to formulate the questions to be asked and develop skills in research fieldwork and data analysis.

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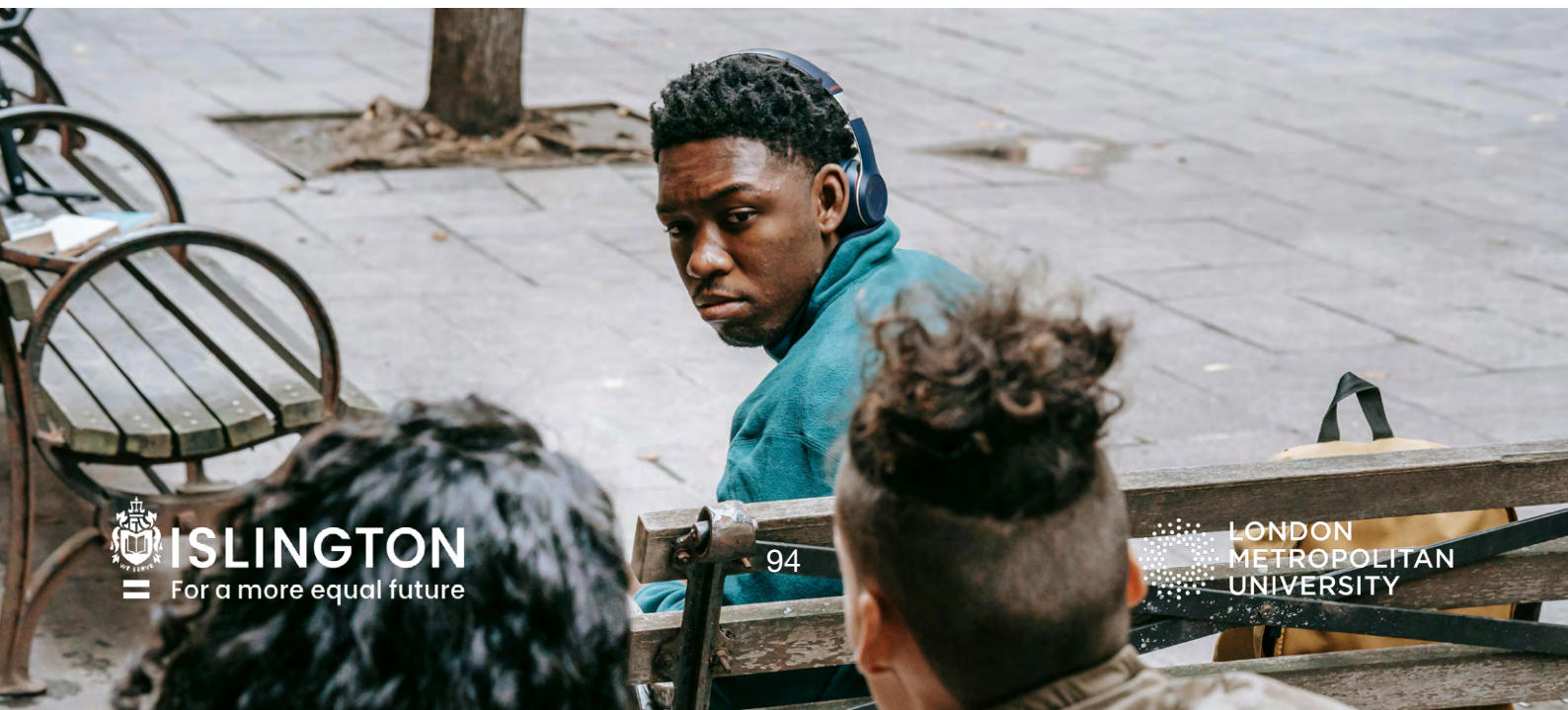
Recommendations

Everyone spoken to as part of this evaluation's commitment to improving youth safety was clearly evident throughout the evaluation. Within the borough, there is a culture of innovation that prioritises identifying data led solutions that aim to ensure young people and their families can access the support they need as quickly as possible. To aid with the council's ambitions to address youth violence and ensure that young people growing up in the borough are safe, the following are put forward as recommendations.

1 The local authority should draw on successful youth violence/gang prevention projects such as MMAGS and Operation Ceasefire and consider how they can work with the police and other partners to develop a community led geographically child friendly borough that will prioritise making young people feel safe and reduce the immediate threat of violence.

2 The council should explore ways to further engage, equip and empower more residents and those with lived experience in its planning and service delivery, this could include:
a.   To support young people in their neighbourhoods and foster a greater sense of community
b.   Provide expert by experience support for bereaved families

3 The council and the police should assess the impact that the community safety partnership's hotspot mapping process has on their efforts to address the overrepresentation of certain groups within stop and search and local crime statistics.

4 The council, the wider Safer Islington Partnership and police should work to ensure the young people they house are placed in safe accommodation that protects them from potential exploitation and supports rather than hinders their access to the services they need.

5 The police should consider how its response teams engage with young people and evaluate whether this is contributing to the sense of fear and isolation experienced by many young people in Islington.

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6 In order to deal with the growing problem, the council and the wider Islington Safety Partnership should evaluate the nature and adequacy of the support they offer to young women within their social care, early help and youth justice services and how that might be sustainably funded.

7 The council should work with its partners and other local authorities to help key funders understand the benefits of longer and more sustainable funding cycles.

8 The local authority should review its data analysis process so that it can identify children and young people/adults at risk of exploitation and/or involved in group based offending more effectively. This will help with predictive analysis processes in relation to these cohorts

9 Building on the robust output data collection, and to help with future planning, the council should consider how it will assess the long term impact of its youth safety interventions.

10 The council, the wider Safer Islington Partnership and police schools officers, should continue to work with schools to develop inclusive school environments, which improve attendance and reduce suspensions and exclusions, including developing a shared plan with robust accountabilities for supporting those not attending school.

11 The council should build upon its children's centres, family and community hubs model and explore how more services, either through embedding specialist staff or upskilling existing workers can be based in community settings.

12 The council should continue to work with local minoritized groups to ensure its staff and delivery of services can better support and also reflect those they are aiming to support.

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