

Communities Scrutiny Committee

Themed Review 2021-22

Violence Reduction Partnership

Introduction

I'm lucky to have chaired the Communities Scrutiny Committee throughout the last four years. During this time, the borough has seen enormous challenges. Serious youth violence was at a peak in Waltham Forest over summer 2018, and across London generally. The Council was not alone in facing this challenge – unlike other boroughs, however, it took the decision to follow a public health approach along with its community partners to address this challenge. The Violence Reduction Partnership is an innovative solution that's led by the Council but works with a range of partners – primarily the Metropolitan Police, but also local community groups, voluntary services, NHS health partners, schools and housing associations.

When the Covid-19 lockdown began in March 2020, there was an immediate drop in violence. However, like all ward councillors, I was concerned that the end of lockdown would initiate a surge in youth violence over Summer 2020. Although this happened to some extent, the Council's strong existing VRP meant that it was not as badly affected as other boroughs. During the same period, the tragic murder of George Floyd in the USA triggered the Black Lives Matter movement worldwide, and gave us all an impetus to examine how our practices are actively anti-racist. The Council and specifically the VRP took this opportunity: tackling racial disparity was a renewed priority, with active involvement from young people of colour affected by violence.

The VRP has come out stronger from the effects of both of these global challenges. It provided an opportunity to refresh the strategy in Summer 2021; at this point, the Committee was invited to review the overall strategy and decided to use the remaining meetings of the municipal year to dig down into each strand. It was a creative and productive review, with invaluable contributions from the Council's partners.

As always, I'm delighted that the Committee was joined at every meeting by young people from the Council's Young Advisors and Youth Independent Advisory Groups. Their contribution to this Committee is invaluable. I would like to thank them for taking the time and effort to read the papers, contribute intelligent questions, and genuinely listen to the answers they're given. They are best placed to understand the challenges faced by our young people today. I would also like to thank Cllr Ahsan Khan, Portfolio Lead Member for Community Safety, for his leadership; Alastair Macorkindale and Laura Butterworth, for their dedication to reducing violence and their detailed reports and expertise; Jane Brueseke, for her work with the young people; and all the external witnesses who kindly gave up their time to contribute to this review.

Cllr Karen Bellamy, Chair of Communities Scrutiny

Summary of recommendations

The Committee recommends:

Treat

- That the Council continue to work with St Giles Trust and health partners to monitor the effectiveness of the in-hospital urgent response protocol, with particular regard to repeat presentations and female victims of gang violence
- That the Council and its partners use serious case reviews and other available evidence to continue to identify 'reachable, teachable moments'
- That the Council and its partners continue to use data collected through the urgent response protocol to identify the communities most likely to be affected by serious youth violence
- That the Council and its partners use the NHS Vanguard programme to monitor the prevalence of young people affected by youth violence who have Education and Health Care Plans or identified developmental needs; that through this identification, health partners offer appropriate care where necessary

Support

- That the Council and its partners acts swiftly when identifying and carrying out preventative mental health interventions
- That the Council investigates the feasibility of replicating the successful partnership model implemented at the Outset Centre across other locations in the borough
- That a process is formalised whereby councillors are communicated with when activities linked to the VRP strategy will take place in their wards
- That the Council and its partners consider subsidising travel fares for young people who wish to join activities not in their locality

Strengthen

- That, with the understanding that increased public trust in police is vital in reducing the high perception of crime, the Met Police work with partners including the Council to build trust in a meaningful way:
 - By engaging with young people through the Young Advisor and YIAG forums
 - By ensuring young people who apply to join the Police are appropriately supported through the application process and receive meaningful feedback if they are not successful
 - By ensuring that forums where Police can be held to account are open and accountable
 - By engaging with ward councillors

Background

Context

The Violent Reduction Partnership (VRP) was first established in 2018¹. It brings together partners drawn from across the Council, the Metropolitan Police, health, education, business and the borough's community groups. Partners work together through the prism of a public health approach which tackles both violence and the causes of violence.

¹ <https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/neighbourhoods/crime-and-community-safety/community-safety/violence-reduction-partnership-vrp#:~:text=Waltham%20Forest's%20public%20health%20approach,violence%20to%20control%20the%20spread>

The overarching goal of the VRP is to reduce violence in Waltham Forest so that residents feel safe. Its stated deliverables to achieve this are to:

- Tackle violence;
- End racial disparity;
- Improve public perceptions of violence; and
- Visibly demonstrate its leadership

The VRP takes a four-strand public health approach to tackle violence and its causes:

- **Curtail** violent acts at source, pursuing perpetrators and enforcing action
- **Treat** those who've been exposed to violence to control the spread
- **Support** those susceptible to violence due to their exposure to risk factors
- **Strengthen** community resilience through a universal approach

The Communities Scrutiny Committee is the designated committee to scrutinise community safety. It is also the committee that looks at the Council's community safety partnership which includes many of the same partners involved in the VRP.

Throughout the pandemic the committee scrutinised many of the operational aspects of the VRP. With restrictions having eased and many adjustments to the pandemic having been made, the committee felt it was a vital time to take a strategic look at the work of the VRP and assess how prepared it was to operate in a new landscape with new challenges.

Methodology

The committee decided to look at the VRP by scrutinising the work being carried out under each of the public health strands. They would take one strand at each meeting, inviting relevant witnesses to attend, asking them questions and compiling recommendations.

One focus of the VRP is to involve young people and incorporate their feedback in a more formal process. As the committee membership includes members of the Council's Young Advisors and Youth Independent Advisory Group, this would provide a useful forum to get direct feedback from young people.

July 2021 – VRP Strategic Programme Plan²

In the first meeting of the year, the committee received a report that provided an overview of the VRP programme. It agreed its approach of bringing one of the four strands to each of the committee's next meetings.

During this meeting members used the opportunity to shape what they would like to see in the review. They asked for some emphasis on how each of the strands would inform each other and how the partnership was funded. To this last point, the committee were informed that it would be funded through applications to the London Violence Reduction fund, that some aspects would be funded by the Council and that external funding was being sought.

October 2021 – Curtail³

During this meeting the committee heard about the first of the public health strands: Curtail. Curtail aims to prevent and disrupt violent acts and ensure perpetrators are pursued,

² <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=723&MId=5343&Ver=4>

³ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=723&MId=5344&Ver=4>

prosecuted and rehabilitated. This strand relies on cross-partnership work between various Council departments and the police. The report noted that Serious Youth Violence had peaked in Waltham Forest in 2018, and had been declining ever since, at a faster rate than the rest of London. In particular, the number of gun offences had declined by 70% between August 2015 and September 2021, in comparison to a 5% decline in the rest of London. However, the perception of Waltham Forest as a violent place was strong: residents were consistently among the most likely in London to be fearful of gun and knife crime.

The Metropolitan Police carried out numerous operations, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns. Where appropriate, Council officers from the anti-social behaviour team have aided the police. Operation Chunal commenced in September 2020 and involved targeting the issue at source, by visiting homes of children believed to be at risk of serious youth violence, speaking at schools, and listening to youth panels, as well as more traditional methods such as weapon sweeps. The emphasis was on decriminalised outcomes, so some offenders – particularly younger teenagers who had not been involved in crime before – were given conditional cautions or referrals to youth engagement work where appropriate.

On a localised level, the police pioneered Operation 20x20x20: this would focus on a joint approach between the Council and the police to address serious anti-social behaviour across all 20 wards in Waltham Forest. The Police and Council would work together to reduce ASB and tackle problem priorities of each ward, working on information from both residents and councillors. Although this operation was at the early stages it had already had successes in stopping anti-social behaviour.

The Committee were impressed by the intelligence-led work and particularly commended the police for their initiative in using Council resources to better target young people following the Covid-19 lockdown, exemplified by their proactive approach to going into schools and seeking out young people at risk.

December 2021 – Treat⁴

The committee took a report from Alastair Macorkindale, Director of Early Help, about the Treat strand of the VRP. This strand emphasises therapeutic treatment for those who have already been exposed to violence and preventing further harm. The therapeutic treatment is available through three different teams, depending on the age of the adolescent and whether the whole family is happy to be supported; for adults, the Council commissions Change Grow Live, a local charity that also provides substance abuse services. All therapeutic work is overseen by the all-age Exploitation and Risk Panel, which was borne out of learning from the Serious Case Review of Child C in May 2020⁵.

Also in response to this Serious Case review, the Council had reviewed how it could better respond to 'reachable moments'. One of these was working closely with local frontline health services. Royal London Hospital commissioned St Giles Trust to provide caseworkers in its Accident & Emergency department. This service was expanded into Whipps Cross Hospital in Waltham Forest (part of the same hospital trust) in a joint partnership between Barts Trust,

⁴ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=723&MId=5345&Ver=4>

⁵ https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-11/WFSCB%20-%20SCR%20Child%20C%20May%20final_.pdf

the Council and St Giles Trust. The caseworkers provide intensive support to help young people emotionally and practically both in hospital and once they are discharged.

The Committee was joined by Oluseun Sowole, a caseworker from St Giles Trust based at Whipps Cross. Mr Sowole said that as well as engaging with young people, the project also trained hospital staff to engage with young people and help follow-up and make referrals. With regard to 'reachable, teachable moments', Mr Sowole said that it was important to note that young people may need to be reached several times before they decide to take the help that's on offer; the most important thing was to offer them consistency and always show them that a way out exists.

The Committee asked about the demographics of who was at risk. Mr Sowole said the team had male and female caseworkers, making it easier to reach both boys and girls. With regard to ethnicity, he said that many cultural backgrounds were affected, and it wasn't easy to break these down. The Committee asked about young people with learning difficulties such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, and particularly those with an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) in place. Mr Macorkindale said that it was difficult to track young people with EHCPs, and that a new NHS Vanguard project (commencing early 2022) would include dedicated speech and language therapy work and would effectively screen and track for that.

February 2022 – Support⁶

Steve Barnabis, founder of Project Zero, was invited to attend this meeting. Mr Barnabis has worked in Waltham Forest for many years, and has built up close relationships with the Council and other voluntary organisations. Project Zero had moved into the Council-owned community hub Outset Centre a year previously.

This meeting reviewed the Support strand of the VRP. Mr Macorkindale brought a report on how those susceptible to violence or exploitation were supported by the Council and partners in a holistic way. Central to this approach was ensuring that best practice was followed; that the poor public perception was challenged; that there was an emphasis on tackling racial disparity; and that Waltham Forest continued to develop innovative approaches and methods.

The Committee asked about the impact of the pandemic on young people and skills and employment. Mr Macorkindale said that the Council had used its networks through the Outset Centre – which held an employability clinic – and the Streetbase team – which engaged with young people on the Beaumont Estate – to find out what kind of support young people wanted with regards to employment. This led to a successful employment fair that attracted local organisations including the Council itself, the skills and networking charity Spark2life, the work experience and skills platform Think Foundation, and Groundwork.

Mr Barnabis spoke about the opportunities that Project Zero offered to young people. The Committee asked about the possibility of more youth hubs in the future, and Mr Barnabis said that he was frequently on the look out for more sources of income that would allow Project Zero to expand. He noted that Project Zero was about to hold a week of activities in Chingford for half term, at 228 Chingford Mount Road.

⁶ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=723&MId=5346&Ver=4>

The Committee asked about the positive impacts and challenges of the Outset Centre. Mr Barnabis noted engagement with schools, inclusion and alternative provisions, and the number of young people who had gained employment. He said that Project Zero had received funding from the shopping centre Westfield, launched a digital talent programme and been donated a bus from Worth Unlimited to act as a drop-in point for young people. He noted the challenge of having enough team members to apply for grant applications and finding funding to support families in need.

April 2022 – Strengthen⁷

The Committee took a report on the final strand of the VRP – Strengthen. This strand is the broadest of the four and relates to how the general community is supported – residents, community groups and young people. The report detailed a number of initiatives that aren't directly related to serious youth violence, but are designed to steer people away from violence wherever possible; for example – the 'Ask Us' initiative, where people in the community are trained up as ambassadors and can refer people to relevant services where appropriate; and the Botvin Essential Life Skills programme delivered by Barnardo's for young people aged 8-11.

Alexandra Hobman, Life Skills Coordinator at Barnardo's, joined the Committee and gave further background around the Life Skills programme. She said that schools were best placed to deliver the scheme as they knew their children so well. She said that Botvin Life Skills was evidence-based and used by schools around the world. The Committee asked about the effect of Covid-19 on young people, and whether teachers were well placed to identify deteriorating mental health, and she noted that teachers were trained and guided on how to do this.

The Committee spoke about the effect of the police. The report noted that perception of crime in Waltham Forest remained high, particularly in relation to actual crime rates, which were better than comparable boroughs and had decreased over the past couple of years. When asked about why this perception remained, Laura Butterworth, Head of Violence Reduction, said that public trust in the police was often a key factor in perception of crime rates. The Committee noted that recent controversies – such as the Child Q case in Hackney – had had a worsening effect on public trust in the police. The Young Advisors spoke about the lack of trust in policing among young people. They said that there had been some initiatives to encourage young people to join the police, to ensure the demographics of the force better represented the borough it served; however, the police had not supported young people who had applied for this. Those who had been unsuccessful had not been given feedback. They felt this was an example of the police exemplifying a positive change without backing this up with action.

Key findings

Treat

The Committee recommends:

⁷ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=723&MIId=5347&Ver=4>

- That the Council continue to work with St Giles Trust and health partners to monitor the effectiveness of the in-hospital urgent response protocol, with particular regard to repeat presentations and female victims of gang violence
- That the Council and its partners continue to use data collected through the urgent response protocol to identify the communities most likely to be affected by serious youth violence
- That the Council and its partners use the NHS Vanguard programme to monitor the prevalence of young people affected by youth violence who have Education and Health Care Plans or identified developmental needs; that through this identification, health partners offer appropriate care where necessary

The Committee commended the innovative hospital outreach programme that had been set up as a partnership between the Council, Barts Health NHS Trust and St Giles Trust. The aim of the programme was to identify young people who had been victim of serious youth violence and to offer them support. As Mr Sowole emphasised, they may not accept support the first time, or even the second – but just knowing it was there and would continue to be was hugely important. The Committee drilled down into the demographics of those who'd been identified, and noted that as the programme continued, it would be useful to ensure that the support was targeted in the right way. They were enthused about the identified NHS funding that could help young people with EHCPs, and asked for this to be reported back on in the future.

- That the Council and its partners use serious case reviews and other available evidence to continue to identify 'reachable, teachable moments'

The Committee noted that tragic cases over the last two years, including the death of Child C, had led to statutory Serious Case Reviews taking place. It was important to fully integrate the learning from these reviews into future work. One of the findings from the review into Child C's death had been about the importance of identifying a 'reachable moment', where a young person could be prevented from further harm. The aim of the hospital outreach programme was to act as a point where this reachable moment could be identified and utilised to protect a young person at risk.

Support

- That the Council and its partners acts swiftly when identifying and carrying out preventative mental health interventions
- That the Council investigates the feasibility of replicating the successful partnership model implemented at the Outset Centre across other locations in the borough
- That the Council and its partners consider subsidising travel fares for young people who wish to join activities not in their locality

The partnership with Project Zero is relatively new. The Council understands that stopping the causes of serious youth violence runs deep and requires a holistic approach. The Council itself isn't always best placed to do this, so working with partners is key. The partnership with Project Zero at the Outset Centre is an excellent example of how the Council can work with the community for the benefit of everyone: Steve Barnabis's previous charity, the Soul Project, had been active in Waltham Forest for 13 years when it lost its premises after the landlord decided to sell. Settling in a Council-owned property at a reduced

rent has given the new iteration certainty and security. Moreover, although the Council and Project Zero work closely together, the programme remains independent.

With the bulk of youth work still taking place in certain areas of the borough – such as central Walthamstow – the Committee asked for reassurance that young people throughout the borough could remain engaged. Project Zero has plans to expand, and had recently run a holiday scheme in Chingford. The Committee suggested that facilitating cheaper travel for young people in the meantime would be a good way to ensure that young people throughout Waltham Forest were able to participate.

- That a process is formalised whereby councillors are communicated with when activities linked to the VRP strategy will take place in their wards

The Committee commended the various programmes taking place under the VRP strategy. They noted that sometimes they heard about events too late – for example, the fact that Project Zero had a temporary holiday programme running in Chingford during the February half term. Councillors are ideally placed in their communities to act as a link between the Council and residents. They therefore asked that a process be put in place to ensure better communication, so they could promote relevant events to their constituents.

Strengthen

The Committee recommends:

- That, with the understanding that increased public trust in police is vital in reducing the high perception of crime, the Met Police work with partners including the Council to build trust in a meaningful way:
 - By engaging with young people through the Young Advisor and YIAG forums
 - By ensuring young people who apply to join the Police are appropriately supported through the application process and receive meaningful feedback if they are not successful
 - By ensuring that forums where Police can be held to account are open and accountable
 - By engaging with ward councillors

At this meeting, the input of the Young Advisors and members of the Youth Independent Advisory Group was invaluable. The interim coordinator for Streetbase, Gulcin Sariyildiz, was also present. Streetbase is a programme commissioned by the Council and run by the Young Advisors whereby young people engage with other young people in the community. Alongside their own knowledge of the borough, they work alongside youth engagement police officers and the Council's anti-social behaviour team to identify where young people gather and speak to them as peers. Although the majority of the time, this is simply an opportunity to connect and for the young people to find out more about services at the Council, sometimes it's a way of identifying people at risk of violence. The Young Advisors/YIAG members noted that the young people they spoke with had very little trust in the police.

The Committee was alarmed to hear that the police had not been supportive with helping young people apply to the police. They suggested that the Council could play a more active role by brokering between the Young Advisor / YIAG forums and the police as part of the application process. This could link in with the Council's Jobs Recovery Strategy.

Conclusion

The Violence Reduction Partnership has been in place since 2018. During that time, the Committee has had several updates; however, this was the first time it was able to scrutinise the VRP in the round, with a logical link between each of the strands. The strands closest to the actual violence – Curtail and Treat – were of clear interest to the committee. This was particularly with regard to direct interventions, such as the innovative hospital intervention pathway with St Giles Trust. It was clear that this was a valuable tool in identifying young people who had been affected by violence; even if they were unwilling to make a change immediately, they were made aware of the available services. This was a welcome outcome of the Serious Case Review into the death of Child C.

However, a running theme throughout the review was a difficult relationship with the police, which came to a head at the final meeting of the review. Members and young people expressed frustration with how the police interact with them. It is clear that the police will need to work hard to restore public trust. The Council works closely with them and can support in brokering relationships but ultimately it is up to the police themselves to make the change.