

**INDEPENDENT COMMISSION INTO  
THE PUBLIC SAFETY OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN  
TOWER HAMLETS**

**DRAFT**

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## Executive Summary

Knife crime, reports and fears of teenage gangs, a climate of fear of on the streets: these are some of the concerns of the press, and often the fears of the residents. In response, in 2008 Tower Hamlets established a commission which set itself the task of looking at how serious the problem is and what can be done to make young people safe.

The commission was composed of senior representatives from relevant organisations including the local authority, Metropolitan Police, academics, those involved in the justice system and members of the community. Witnesses were called and documentary evidence was submitted. In particular, commissioners listened to scores of young people, to their parents and teachers, and to people who had been victims of crime. There were six commission sessions in total between October and December 2008.

The findings of the commission, in line with "Time for Action", the mayor's report on youth violence across London (Nov 08), were that reporting is disproportionate, and that violence is not as rampant as we are led to believe. The vast majority of teenagers are law abiding, and the crime rate is falling. Moreover, knife crime and gang culture are less prevalent in Tower Hamlets than in similar boroughs. Nevertheless, a worrying number of young people are nervous travelling within the borough and violence and anti-social behaviour are real features of life on the streets.

Commissioners looked at the causes of violence and the fear of violence. They have made recommendations which they believe will help prevent knife crime, stop young people becoming involved in gangs, and address the fear of crime on the streets.

**Foreword**

**Councillor Lutfur Rahman**

As Leader of Tower Hamlets Council I am delighted to introduce the report of the Independent Commission into the Public Safety of Young People, the outcome of an investigation into concerns about violence on the streets. Why has the number of young people murdered across the capital been rising? Just how serious is the problem, and what can we do about it? These, and numbers of related questions exercised us throughout the autumn of 2008, and our findings and recommendations are recorded here.

Commissioners want to be sure that enough is being done to protect young people. We were concerned to see that often young people were not confident that older people and the community at large could protect them, and that when young people go out they are "on their own". This must change. We not only want to cut crime, we also have an obligation to protect young people; we must accept that responsibility.

Issues around knife crime and gang culture are deeply complex, which is why the commission sought the views of so many expert witnesses, including young people themselves. The commission was highly impressed with the quality of the witnesses, and the way young people spoke eloquently and intelligently about their experience.

This report includes a series of recommendations that all the organisations forming the Tower Hamlets Partnership are committed to acting on to ensure young people, and the rest of the community, feel safe. The report makes for surprising reading, and we believe it reflects the thoroughness, seriousness and commitment of all those who took part and are working to make Tower Hamlets a safer place to live.

**Cllr Lutfur Rahman**

**Chair**

**February 2009**

## Introduction

This multi-agency panel was established to determine the extent of violent crime and the prevalence of gang culture in the borough, and to find lasting, practical and radical solutions to these and linked issues.

What are we doing right and what more needs to be done? What services are available for young people to keep them, and the communities in which they live, safe? How do we stop young people joining gangs in the first place? These are a few of the questions the commission was set up to address.

## Perception and reality

Recently the media has reported a number of tragic cases of violent crime in which young people have died as a result of knives, firearms and assaults. These crimes have mainly taken place in deprived areas of our larger cities. This commission noted that here in Tower Hamlets, despite the fact it scores highly on many of the indices of deprivation, the problem is less severe than in similar boroughs.

Tower Hamlets has many of the same social problems as other areas in which gang-related violence is much worse. Levels of deprivation are high by most indicators; housing is often poor and overcrowded; the youth population is proportionally high and there are relatively few large open spaces.

Nevertheless, Tower Hamlets is a safer place for young people, and the population as a whole, than many of its neighbours. Last year (2008) not one young person died in the borough as a result of violent crime. In 2008, within the 33 boroughs of London, Tower Hamlets was 18<sup>th</sup> for violent crime and 22<sup>nd</sup> for robbery. These figures were not comforting, but neither were they alarming. Our young people are our future, and we must invest in our future. We are fortunate within the borough that through the Tower Hamlets Partnership, young people's level of participation and involvement in decision making is comparatively high. The aim is to build on this work and to place Tower Hamlets near or at the top of these tables.

Although the most recent police data show that the rate of knife crime is falling, our most recent residents' survey showed that the public perception is that knife crime is rising. It is important to differentiate between the scale of concern felt by the public and the scale of the problem dealt with by the agencies involved in prevention.

Moreover, any future course of action must deal with the twin approach public safety, and the perception of public safety.

The recent Tower Hamlets Residents Panel Consultation report conveyed a cautionary note of realism:

***“46% felt that anti-social behaviour in their neighbourhood had stayed the same over the past 3 years. A third felt it had got worse. Younger respondents were most likely to feel anti-social behaviour has got worse. ‘Teenagers hanging around on the street’ was perceived to be the biggest problem in respondents’ local areas.” (1)***

So there is an underlying public concern to address, and we are clear that this will be a test for both the Tower Hamlets Partnership and the local community. This commission has looked at what we are doing better than our neighbours, but also at what we can learn from their experiences.

It's important that we distinguish perception from reality. One effect of the media focus on gangs and violence is that many people believe crime is worse than it really is; that the streets are dangerous and out of control and that "no-go zones" exist in our cities.

This phenomenon becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: if people are too scared to go out after dark, then the only people left on the street are those who are either unafraid or who have no choice. We need to demonstrate that violent crime is relatively low, violent criminals are locked up, and most young people aren't involved in gangs or crime. In fact, they are more often than not the victims. As was noted in the DCSF's Youth Crime Action Plan:

***"Youth crime means young victims. Young people can be victims of crime as well as the perpetrators. In fact they are more likely than adults to be victims of crime. Our criminal justice system aims to 'put the victim at the centre'. However, many young people do not report crime, are not involved in the justice system and are therefore not accessing the support on offer to them." (2)***

#### **What is a "gang"?**

Great care should be taken when choosing terms like "gangs" and "groups", "young people" and "youths." It's not always easy to distinguish between a group of young people and a gang – especially when walking down the street, or when lots of young people enter the DLR carriage. The media's sensationalising of gang culture can lead us to assume that all young people are "up to no good", and a threat to those around them.

We know that young people feel a great deal of frustration that so much of the attention paid to them by the media is negative. A focus on gangs, knives, guns, hoodies, "postcode wars", all reinforce public perceptions that young people are out of control.

It is especially important to define the difference between a gang and a group of young people. A great many academic studies have sought to define what constitutes a "gang". For the purposes of this report, the commission used the definition given by the Islington Report:

***"...a group of people coming together on a regular basis in order to commit crime." (3)***

Using this definition, most young people in the borough are not members of any gang, and probably have no intention of ever joining one. Nevertheless, many young people do tend to congregate in large numbers, particularly when traversing the borough and beyond, because they *feel* safer.

### **Historical and geographical perspectives**

Territorialism is nothing new, particularly in areas like the East End; Victorian London was a vastly more dangerous place than it is today. There have been gangs for centuries. By the standards of many other major world cities, 21<sup>st</sup> Century London is relatively safe, and the East End probably safer than at any point in recorded history.

A particularly encouraging finding of this commission is that young people tend to define themselves by their neighbourhood rather than by their race, religion or ethnicity. Where an area is predominantly Bengali, then so are the groups of young people from that area; when the area is mixed, so too is the make-up of local groups. Ours is a tolerant and inclusive borough and we need to celebrate that fact.

However, the commission has identified some worrying trends. As well as consulting specialists, this commission has actively sought the views of young people, many of whom provided personal experiences to the commission. Too many young people in our borough feel afraid to travel, even to and from school. Many are worried by the violence and drugs in their neighbourhood. Some believe that joining a gang will provide them with safety, respect, a sense of belonging and a lifestyle otherwise unobtainable in their lives.

We need to show young people that gangs and knives make them less safe, not more; that being feared is not the same as earning respect; that this sense of belonging gangs claim to offer is false; there are other ways to become happy, successful adults, without any of the dangers that are the result of being in a gang.

### **Consultation**

Ours is one of the first local authorities to have established a commission into young people's safety. We have been extremely impressed by the thoroughness of the recent Islington Report, whose authors provided excellent guidance as we planned and set up our own commission.

It was obvious from the start that to get a full picture, and find the right answers, we needed to formulate cross-directorate strategies and multi-organisational involvement. Consequently we invited an influential range of witnesses and commission members of the highest quality and from the highest levels across a wide range of relevant parties, including health, the law and academia.

As part of the consultation, members of the commission also visited organisations and projects which are working to combat knife crime and gang culture. Then they reported back to the commission with their findings. Each member of the commission also read extensive background literature – reports, articles, and academic papers – to inform them in their decision-making.

There are many questions that can only be answered by young people themselves. What do young people experience, what are they afraid of, and what do they want us to do to enable them to make the right choices in their lives?

What makes our commission distinctive, and its findings so relevant, is the level of input provided by young people. A survey was conducted by Tower Hamlets Youth Service, and the main questions centred on 'Crime and Safety – how does it affect you?' The survey was conducted on an internet blog ([amp.uk.net](http://amp.uk.net)) as well as through a focus group and at Young Democracy Week.

It is the input by so many of our young people, some of whom were also directly involved in decision making and presentations to the commission, that makes this such a relevant, thorough and important document. Its findings are sometimes surprising, and occasionally make for sombre reading, but altogether provide both a useful summary of the commission's findings and a practical tool for ensuring the future safety of young people in Tower Hamlets.



## **Our approach**

The commission into the Public Safety of Young People in Tower Hamlets is composed of elected members of the Council and a range of Children's Services partners. These partners include representatives of the Metropolitan Police, Crown Prosecution Service, academics, community groups, senior council officers and religious organisations.

To help enable the commission understand the nature of the problem of youth crime and safety, and make recommendations that will help tackle the problems, key stakeholders and decision makers from within the borough and further afield were called as witnesses.

The commission ran over six sessions between 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2008 and 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008. Each session had a distinct theme, and witnesses were called according to their area of expertise. For the purposes of lucidity, some statements have been moved to the most relevant sections and their evidence summarised.

The six sessions were chaired under the "Chatham House Rule", which enables the free sharing of information and a guarantee of anonymity: ***"When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed"***.

**Membership of the Commission**

Cll Lutfur Rahman, Leader + Chair

Cll Clair Hawkins, Deputy Chair

Cll Abdal Ullah

Kevan Collins, Director of Children's Services

Alex Kuye, Deputy Young Mayor

Faiza Mukith, Deputy Young Mayor

Abdi Hassan, Ocean Somali

Sally Bentley, Head of Thames Youth Magistrates Bench

Toks Adesuyan, Borough Crown Prosecutor, Tower Hamlets

Margaret Barker, GOL/Home Office

Professor John Pitts, University of Bedfordshire

Reverend Houston, Bethnal Green Mission Church

Hira Islam, Council of Mosques

Chief Sup Paul Rickett, Inspector Stephen Manger, Inspector Steve Kennedy (Metropolitan Police)

Commander Dave Sharman, Commander Bruce Epsley (Fire and Rescue Service)

Joanna Gaukroger, Principal, Tower Hamlets College

Joan Murphy, Poplar HARCA (Housing Association)

## **Crime in Tower Hamlets: what's the reality?**

### **Box quote**

"I've never had trouble, but me and my friends just stay near – we don't go far. Even on the bus, after school, you have to watch it. I don't think no-one would help."

### **14 year-old**

The first commission session took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2008 under the heading: *'What is the scale of concern for young people's safety within the borough?'* and set itself the task of establishing the extent of the problem of youth safety in Tower Hamlets. In order to examine whether the perception of crime is worse than the reality, witnesses were called from the front line organisations who deal with the aftermath of anti-social behaviour and violent crime.

By far the greatest cause of public concern is knife crime. There is a widespread belief – encouraged by some elements of the media – that many, if not all young men carry weapons and are prepared to use them.

Tower Hamlets has often been under the spotlight in media coverage about violent crime, and anecdotal evidence suggests many people in London believe the East End to be one of the most dangerous areas of the city. However, the reality is that knife crime is still relatively low in the borough. A surgeon from the Royal London Hospital provided a unique perspective on violent crime here in Tower Hamlets:

"The Trauma Unit treats major trauma injuries – that is, injuries which are life threatening or limb threatening, admitted via helicopter or ambulance. One third of patients come from local catchment areas, including Tower Hamlets. In 2004 we saw 10 young people up to the age of 18 with severe life threatening injuries, caused by stabbing. Last year, there were 32: and this year (up to end September 2008) there are 37. Often (being stabbed) leads to permanent disability. These are not Tower Hamlets figures, we only know figures where the victims lives/from where the ambulance 'call out' is made. Trauma in general, and penetrating injuries, is a young man's problem. Overall, in terms of fatalities London is a safe city; in the media there is a lot of focus on young people dying, but there are also young people who are stabbed and rendered permanently disabled. There is little evidence of repeat stabbing. The injuries are not more serious due to weapons type, rather according to intent. There are recurrent themes: mostly, wrong person wrong time, essentially school pupils usually picked on. They are essentially normal kids that get into this situation, though it takes a while to break down "adults-and-kids" barriers.

"We have a duty to prevent not just cure. We have spoken to local schools, though you have to be very careful as research indicates that shock tactics don't always have the desired effect: it can have a backlash.

“There is a postcode effect, but it is the postcode in which the parents of these victims grew up. The groups which need targeting are the teenagers and five year olds who are potentially at risk; and those people who are about to have children.”

Commissioners found this evidence very persuasive. These are “essentially normal kids” who are seriously hurt, physically and psychologically. There are patterns as to where the crimes are committed. Most disturbingly, this witness emphasised that patterns of perpetrators related parental attitudes, and aspirations; that anti-social behaviour in young people was more common where the children’s parents had been raised in poverty.

Commissioners became very interested in the links between a prosperous and a safe community as part of the strategy for safety.

It appeared that direct links to gang-related crime in Tower Hamlets was lower than in similar Inner London boroughs. According to statistics released by Tower Hamlets Partnership, the borough is 18<sup>th</sup> highest out of 33 for violence and 22<sup>nd</sup> highest for robbery.

Despite these encouraging figures, the public perception is that crime in the borough is both rife and increasing. As well as fighting crime, therefore, it’s important to tackle misconceptions around crime and gangs.

It’s too easy to blame the media alone for the widely-held belief that our streets are dangerous. In fact, in Tower Hamlets over the last five years violent crime in Tower Hamlets has fallen consistently. Sadly, however, the number of teenagers dying violently across the capital is rising.

Certain crimes are more “glamorous” than others; when a teenager is stabbed and that crime is linked to gangs it’s easier for some branches of the media to repeat stories about “postcode wars” and refer to loose associations of young people as gangs with exciting names rather than what they often are: groups of young people.

Tower Hamlets is a densely-populated borough, with a high number of over-crowded households. Young people tend to congregate on the street and this can make older people in particular feel insecure, even when the young people are just “hanging around”.

There are many reasons why young people like to hang out together. It’s important that they should not be seen as a problem when that’s all they are doing: socialising. However, large groups do tend to intimidate, whether intentionally or not, because people tend to act differently in groups. According to the University College London (UCL) report “guns, gangs & weapons”:

***“There is a strong social science research literature which shows that individuals in groups behave very differently than they do when alone. They take more risks, they feel pressure to conform with the majority, and they feel less personal responsibility.” (4)***

Within larger groups younger people often feel safer, and are more likely to commit crime. However, in groups they are at greater risk of being involved in violence (including becoming a victim) and of being arrested. As was

noted in the UCL's "Five Borough Alliance":

***"Research on gangs – conducted in both the United States and the United Kingdom – consistently reveals that gang membership tends both to enhance offending and to facilitate offending. In other words, some individuals who previously engage in minor offending tend to engage in more serious offending after joining gangs; and some individuals start offending after joining gangs." (5)***

According to a survey operated by the police and council (February 2007 – February 2008), 80% of young people feel safe at school. However, 50% said they feared gangs and groups and 50% feared anti-social behaviour and bullying. This report will examine the effectiveness of restorative justice, which is being used with increasing regularity in schools nationwide.

#### **Box quote**

"It's not enough to congratulate ourselves that there are fewer stabbings and gang problems in Tower Hamlets. Whatever the reality here, too many young people feel afraid. Unless we can find out why this is the case and ensure they can move around the borough not just being safe but *feeling* safe, we are failing our young people."

**Kevan Collins, Director of Children's Services**

One of the greatest problems within Tower Hamlets and across London is crime committed by young people against young people outside school and outside school hours, mainly on the transport hub. This often consists of young people being robbed of their mobile phones. There is a huge "spike" in crime at around 4pm.

In neighbouring Newham, the Youth Offending Team and British Transport Police (BTP) are taking part in a groundbreaking Youth Intervention Programme (YIP) aimed at reducing crime and increasing safety on the borough's trains and DLR system (buses are the jurisdiction of the Met). The YIP gives presentations in schools based on incidents that have been dealt with by the BTP.

Partly this multi-agency approach involves talking to young people about the dangers of the system itself; for instance, many young people are unaware that DLR tracks are electrified. The YIP is also looking at other measures to lessen crime, including staggering school closing times.

The issue of gang-related violence on the transport system, particularly to and from school and college, is an ongoing one. This is an issue that needs to be tackled urgently, partly to improve the quality of life for young people but also because the high visibility nature of this problem can provide a false perception of gang problems in the area.

**Tower Hamlets in Context: What Works**

**Box quote**

“Young people frequently say they feel unsafe travelling to other areas, yet incidents where young people are attacked are incredibly rare. We have to demonstrate to young people the vast difference between perception and reality – while doing everything we can to keep them safe, we also need them to *feel* safe.”

**Joanna Gaukroger, Principal, Tower Hamlets College**

The second Commission session took place on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2008 and focussed on how the experience of young people within Tower Hamlets experience compared with those of young people in other areas. The heading for commission 2 was ‘*what is the pan-London perspective: present and future resource implications?*’ A range of work was discussed, and the most effective shared an emphasis on information-sharing between professionals, involving the family, and focusing on reconciliation.

Witnesses were called who were able to provide a geographical and historical perspective on whether Tower Hamlets faces similar problems to other areas.

The most extraordinary aspect of the Tower Hamlets experience is that our gang problem is small compared to neighbouring boroughs, ( figure 1). Our neighbours Newham, Hackney, Waltham Forest and, south of the Thames, the “Five Borough Alliance” (Greenwich, Croydon, Southwark, Lewisham and Lambeth) have higher crime rates and more gangs. The question is: why?



**Figure 1: serious youth violence 2008: top 10 boroughs**

The problem of gangs varies from borough to borough. The evidence seemed to show that Waltham Forest and Hackney have more generational gangs who have been around for a long time. In Newham there are more street gangs and the issues around dealing with postcode and territorialism. Within London the situation can be chaotic; within some areas there is more invisible crime committed. In some boroughs (e.g. Hackney and Newham) gangs operate at a more sophisticated level, sometimes leading to gun crime and fatalities.

At the moment Tower Hamlets is mainly territorial, but gangs from other boroughs do have an influence within the borough. The general age of members involved in street gangs is 15-20, and they are closely aligned with their postcode: many justify this as "defending their space". Gang members often form groups for protection, rather than being formed to carry out attacks.

So what lessons can be learned from other areas with similar and greater problems? A witness from a neighbouring borough which has been afflicted by gang crime related her experience:

"In our borough, in May 2008, there was the shooting of a young Somali, after which there was a view that we needed to target needs better. You need strategies to involve young people in decision-making and to design activities.

"We have identified gangs and began to use police intelligence and information from youth workers about particular names and associates. We also began building a detailed profile. Once we managed to identify the names we then created a situation to speak to these people and their parents.

"We had individual mini network meetings with the young people and parents in a school, and invited relevant partner organisations to the meeting, and set out plans for the young people and their families. In the context of the Somali community in particular, working with mums was paramount: finding out whether or not mums knew about their sons' involvement within gangs.

"The result of these meetings was that summer crime and violence figures dropped. 95% of the parents' response was positive. Only two sets of parents were resistant and didn't want to know; that's when we used housing as 'leverage'.

"We know that housing affects the safety of young people. Lack of housing is a risk factor. The Youth Offending Team has a named accommodation officer. However we used leverage in looking at their behaviour/compliance with programmes and the extent to which lack of co-operation would risk their council accommodation. We also looked at the issue from the other perspective of supporting young people: providing dedicated bed spaces, securing housing in their own right.

"We have a range of intervention programmes, there is summer university, PAYP, and programmes young people have provision to access throughout the year. We involve young people in the design of programmes and focus them towards targeted need areas."

Within Tower Hamlets, there is a problem with older gang members selling drugs to younger people. These groups have traditionally been hard to reach and harder to manage. We are seeing complex relationships develop between non-offenders, offenders, and adults.

Characterisation as a gang member can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We need to be very careful about the language we use. Using the Islington definition, there are only two gangs in Tower Hamlets, and their identities are well known to the Youth Offending Team and police. However, there are a number of other gangs primarily based in neighboring boroughs who frequently operate in our borough.

It's a sad fact that many young people believe that they need to congregate in large numbers for what they perceive as "protection", especially when travelling. This report examines why this is the case. However, 1800 young people travel to and from Tower Hamlets College each day, for instance, and the actual number of cases each year are minimal, so it seems perceptions aren't always borne out in reality.

It is important to recognise that not every young person who carries a knife belongs to a "gang". Nor is a group of young people from the same neighbourhood who hang around necessarily a gang. As was remarked in "Building Bridges":

***"...The situation in London has become so chaotic that someone can be at risk due to the postcode that they live in regardless of whether they individually affiliate themselves with the gang from that postcode. Rivalries can develop along geographical lines with or without gang involvement. The same applies to the sale of drugs. Simply assuming that all deaths are related to gangs, or that all gangs fit within a particular model is unhelpful and misses the vast number of young people who arm themselves or sell drugs but are not officially part of a gang." (6)***

The issue of territorialism is a serious one. Despite evidence to the contrary, many young people believe that if they travel beyond their immediate neighbourhood they run the risk of being attacked. It is for this reason that some young people carry knives, albeit less frequently in Tower Hamlets than in other similar boroughs.

Projects like the Rapid Response Team (RRT), Positive Activities for Young People (PAYP) and a focus on prevention and early intervention all contribute to keeping gang-related crime relatively low in Tower Hamlets. However, as we will demonstrate in the next chapter, many young people don't feel safe, particularly in other neighbourhoods within the borough. Why is this, and what can be done?



## Feeling safe on the streets

### Box quote

“The thing that most struck me about meeting so many young people from Tower Hamlets was their eloquence, their intelligence, the quality of their input. The media often portray all young people as jobs, but most young people care just as passionately about issues like crime – more so, because they’re so often the victim.”

**Margaret Barker, GOL/Home Office**

The third commission session took place on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2008 and listened to young people from Tower Hamlets as they described their experiences in the borough. The session was headed: ‘*Young people and their community – obstacles and solutions.*’

First – the good news. Young people feel safer at school in Tower Hamlets than they do in most other parts of the country. Schools are seen as “neutral” environments where young people from across the borough and beyond can mix and learn in safety. However, young people in Tower Hamlets feel more unsafe outside school than in most other areas. So what are the reasons for these starkly different figures?

Many young people within Tower Hamlets feel unsafe doing things that many older people take for granted – waiting for a bus, visiting the cinema, travelling within or outside the borough. This insecurity often causes young people to congregate in large groups.

The Docklands Light Railway (DLR) does see a disproportionate amount of trouble as groups use it to travel between areas. Free transport for under-16s has seen groups congregating on certain bus routes, particularly during school hours.

Young people have to travel through the borough and further afield in order to go to school, which means travelling into or through areas in which they feel vulnerable (being caught “slipping”). Consequently many travel in groups, and/or carry weapons as “protection”. Many young people assume that other young people carry knives, and so choose to carry a knife, exposing them to great risk of injury or imprisonment.

When consulting young people in the borough, the issue of travelling to and from school and college was one about which they had strong views and many suggestions for improvements. Proposals put forward by young people include staggering school opening hours, making uniforms less recognisable and re-drawing school allocation boundaries.

Within Tower Hamlets, there are a number of project initiatives that actively promote integration, respect and harmony between groups from different areas. Members of some of these organisations described their experiences to the commission.

“Tolerance in Diversity” unifies young people across postcodes through activities and trips. The young people involved were hand-picked by their teachers and asked to take part in projects which integrate “post-coders”. It was explained by the group how young people identify one another as being from another postcode. Identification has less to do with what people wear or how they behave than by whether they are familiar or not. “Strangers” in a district find themselves challenged – sometimes in a threatening manner – and this initial exchange sometimes leads to violence. This project helps to teach young people how to talk to others in a non-threatening way.

For projects like “Tolerance in Diversity” to work, young people need to be involved at a much earlier stage. By the time they reach their teenage years, young people may already begin to see people from other areas as a threat. More resources need to be invested in activities such as residential trips out of the borough to “neutral” locations.

The commission heard from “Tolerance in Diversity”, a project that specializes in tackling hate crime and discrimination. They visit schools and youth groups where they give a presentation and then ask for the view points and experiences of young people. They help each young person to identify a problem issue that’s relevant to them, and help them resolve it.

This project regularly recruits young people to join them as peer workers. During this time they receive training in handling social interaction situations. After a year of volunteering, peer workers can apply for paid positions with the project.

The main issues for safety for young people are different for every group. Tolerance in Diversity has dealt with issues of “turf wars” between Bengali and Somali groups and also with issues of teenage joyriding. They encourage young people to get feedback from the community about problem issues so they can begin to understand the other side of the conflict.

The work of Tolerance in Diversity is about empowering young people. Many problems arise from young people not knowing where they can and can’t be and what they can and can’t do; it’s important to get information to young people about these issues. Tolerance in Diversity mediates by listening to troubles and encouraging young people to talk them through and come up with a solution on their own.

The Commission also heard from the Aasha Project, a group which works with some of the most hard to reach young people involved in gangs and conflicts. As a senior manager explained, its team of dedicated staff along with network of volunteers from the community has helped to mediate, prevent and often resolve gang conflicts: “The Aasha Project discusses issues like conflict and violence with young people. Often the project works to resolve silly issues and misunderstandings, like perceived slights or someone misinterpreting another person’s look. We also look at conflict and safety, exploring the idea of ‘safety in numbers’, which helps create gang culture.

“One suggestion to dispel postcode related tensions has been a borough-wide football team work to dispel postcode related tensions. It might work, but on the other hand, something like that may just appeal to football fans. However, we rolled out a similar initiative with supervisors, which was successful. The activity would probably be more effective if it encouraged people to talk to one another.”

A common complaint among young people across the borough is that the police aren't always sensitive and respectful towards young people.

#### **Box quote**

“Sometimes the police just don't ask, they don't ask properly what's happened. They just look and it's trouble. Once we all got done. The police was just laughing and jeering.”

#### **Teenager from a youth project**

It was clear to the commissioners that there was a lot of very good practice, particularly from successful neighbourhood policing initiatives, but that continued training was needed. Good relations between the police and the community had to be worked at continually, they couldn't be taken for granted. This was particularly true of police coming into the borough from outside.

Referring to an example of this misunderstanding, at a community barbecue in July 2008, a young witness from the Aasha Project said:

“The police can make narrow-minded assumptions. They are intimidating, and that's why youth don't want to engage with them. A mechanism should be put in place between youth and police to foster a greater understanding.”

The police, however, reiterate that their number one priority is protecting people and preventing crime, particularly violent crime. That's why they are now working alongside young people and asking them for guidance on how best to stop and search people they believe are “up to no good”. The Met also oversee Operation Blunt, a cross-borough campaign that uses amnesties, educational programmes and other measures to discourage knife crime.

The responsibility for policing groups of young people is that of the police alone. Nor is their response to observing large groups untypical of the adult population as a whole. As has already been stated in this report, many adults are concerned when witnessing large groups of youths.

Although doing an excellent job, groups like Tolerance in Diversity and the Aasha Project mainly work with young people who are already on the cusp or already in trouble. The commission looked at ways to stop young people becoming involved in the first place, by early intervention and targeting potential problems. In the next chapter this report will look at groups that work with families to try to prevent problems later on.

## Early intervention

### Box quote

“Two rival gangs were engaged in conflict that left two members injured. One of these injured young people was not going to school for fear of the other. The Pupil Referral Unit resolved the conflict with a conversation and a contract of behaviour. Part of the contract stipulated that the boys would sit next to one another at the school assembly the next day. They did, and this dispelled not only the tension between them, but also the tension at the school.”

**Dena Adams, Pupil Referral Unit**

The fourth Commission session took place on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2008 and was headed: ‘*Best Practice to identify, prevent and intervene early?*’ Subjects up for discussion included identifying possible victims and instigators of crime and better parenting.

Many studies have been undertaken into young people’s behaviour and why they form and join gangs. Some join because they lack positive role models; some because they have experienced neglect at home; most come from relatively deprived backgrounds. The YJB’s report, “Groups, gangs & weapons”, noted:

***“For all [gang members], their current involvement in group offending was the result of a gradual process which had often begun with anti-social behaviour at an early age. Progression to increasingly***

*serious forms of delinquency, however, did not occur evenly and might be triggered by a number of factors, including coming under the influence of a new set of friends and attempts to emulate older siblings and their associates, as well as the impact of specific distressing events in their personal lives. A common theme, though, was the influence of older males and some respondents cited the transition to secondary school as an important turning point.” (7)*

Session 4 looked at ways in which children who could potentially become involved in gangs can be identified and helped to make the right choices early in life. Identifying children at risk and targeted early intervention can make an enormous difference later on.

One difficulty with this preventative approach is in targeting the “right” children: some children from happy, stable home lives, adult role models and relative affluence join gangs; others who suffer from all these factors never join a gang or get into trouble.

What seems certain is that early years are important in shaping the rest of children’s lives. By ensuring all children are given nurturing, safe environments in which to play and learn, and providing additional resources for those most at risk, relevant agencies can have a profound impact on behaviour.

In Tower Hamlets, the Youth Inclusion Support Panel (YISP) support children at risk of becoming offenders of violent crime because they have an older sibling who is involved in gangs and violent crime. The YISP was established in 2003 under the Children’s Fund to help 8-13 year olds at risk, and has since been extended in Tower Hamlets to aid the 8-15 age groups.

Parents and children are usually referred to the YISP by the police as a result of anti-social behaviour, and occasionally by parents who have heard about the scheme from other parents. Referrals are also made through schools. The scheme is voluntary.

#### **Box quote**

“My dad was always yelling. I used to stay out. He’d always be on: you’re no good, your clothes, your talk. You’re no good at school. Now (X) comes in. I go out. My dad knows about it and he talks to (X). It’s better. I did music. My dad came and saw me.”

#### **10-year old on the impact of his YISP key-worker**

Parents whose children have been helped by the YISP were overwhelmingly positive about their influence. Often these parents are already at their wits’ end, and when it is demonstrated that the YISP is there to help and not to judge they listen to the panel’s advice.

The YISP organises trips for young people, who then begin to understand that the panel are there to help, and listen to their advice on how to stay out of trouble. The YISP also offers parents advice on how to deal with their children’s behavioural issues.

Over the last two years the YISP has worked with 316 children, of whom just 2% went on to offend. These 2%

have a particularly high incidence of having parents or siblings in prison, and/or drugs misuse problems. The YISP is now looking at ways to better target this hard-to-help group.

The Family Intervention Programme (FIP) was set up under the Government Prevention Programme to work with families who are considered hard to reach. FIP provides intensive intervention over six months. In Tower Hamlets the programme works with all members of the family rather than just the offender. The FIP take on the Lead Professional Role for families, negotiating for them with other agencies.

Although FIP works on the Sanction and Reward model, it has no sanctions or rewards in and of itself, and relies on partner agencies. FIP can work with families to spend small amounts of money, for instance to allow a parent to take a course that will increase their learning potential. The FIP works mainly with the Third Sector.

Established less than two years ago and funded by the DCSF, the FIP has been strongly embraced in Tower Hamlets, where a Child Poverty FIP has already been set up and a Baby FIP is being planned to work with pregnant women in difficult to reach families.

The FIP is in a good position to identify some of the problems faced by families and young people. These include disempowerment, low expectations of what kind of help people can get from services, isolation and negative support systems. There's a large turnover in council flats which contributes to a loss of community, debt, drug use, overcrowding and lack of places for young people to go where they feel safe.

The question of how and where children play is one that is increasingly being seen as important in how they develop as teenagers and adults. Play Association Tower Hamlets (PATH) encourages children to take part in unstructured play, rather than simply participating in video games or sport. Playgrounds can be an important place for positive conflict resolution.

PATH is particularly concerned with how the current furore about knife crime impacts on young people who may be traumatized by violence. Necessary inoculations and lessons in how to cope with life occur in play spaces, and this is where children learn to deal with conflict. Play spaces allow children to distinguish between "good" and "bad" affiliations.

The commission took note of a Stonewall report into homophobic bullying in schools, and noted that young lesbian, gay, and bi-sexual young people were x times more likely to be victims of bullying than their heterosexual peers. The Stonewall survey showed that "Almost two thirds (65 per cent) of young lesbian, gay and bisexual people experience homophobic bullying in Britain's schools. ....Of those who have been bullied, 92 per cent have experienced verbal homophobic bullying, 41 per cent physical bullying and 17 per cent death threats."

Dealing with bullying (including cyber bullying) is a key factor in order to deal with youth violence. Young people who are bullied, whatever the presenting cause, and very unlikely to reach their potential and to achieve the sort of positive social engagement Tower Hamlets wants for its residents. Young people who bully are most at risk of committing future criminal acts. Commissioners noted that an anti-bullying policy is being rolled out across the

borough and feedback on anti-bullying strategies provided to local schools. An anti-bullying helpline is being launched and cards given out to young people advertising the number. Commissioners considered this work to be central in the whole safety strategy.

Restorative Justice is increasingly being used in schools and other settings as a means of encouraging young people to take responsibility for their own actions and understand the impact their actions have on other people. Victims of bullying are given the opportunity to express how they feel to their bully.

Bullies are made to account for their actions and understand how their behaviour affects others. Under the terms of restorative justice, young people sign contracts that stipulate how they will behave in future.

The commission heard from the head teacher at a secondary school in E1 using restorative justice:

“Our school has a strict disciplinary code, including zero tolerance for weapons. A knife arch is used and students found with weapons are permanently excluded. When a child is found to be carrying a knife they are reported to the police. The school works with parents to find that child a placement in another school.

“Restorative Justice is used widely at our school. The system works extremely well because it forces parents to face up to the fact that their children can't go on breaking laws. Since its introduction there have been zero instances of recurrence of problems between any two individuals.”

“Streets of Growth” is a value-led organization, working with kids aged 13-19 years old in career programs. The ethos of the organization is based around transitional coping. The program aims to help young people move away from negative situations and involves intensive case management, as a representative explained:

“Change is where conflict arises, so periods of change in the lives of young people are a major focus; safety is a key issue. There are three main thrusts to the approach of the program, Belonging, Harm, and Generosity.

“As an example, recently we dealt with a young man attending a local school who was involved in anti-social behaviour. The young man was expelled in Year 11. Streets of Growth had been working with this young man since he was 13 years old. On expulsion, he got sent to a PRU at which his gang involvement was raised.

“The young man explained that he'd been pulled into gang activity and hadn't thought to resist, but when his education was taken away from him, he realised that he wanted to turn his life around. He tried to distance himself from his friends who were involved in gang activity, but soon found himself pulled back in.

“Streets of Growth worked with this individual to help him resist, and eventually he learned to turn his phone off when they called so they would be unable to contact him. However, this caused problems in his friendships and social standing. We then worked with him and his friends towards an understanding.

“The young man now has an internship as a plumber. It was a difficult journey, and he had to give up friends along the way, but he managed to get to a point where he got out of the situation while still retaining a sense of belonging in a community.

“We do a lot of street dance, this helps to create a positive gang phenomenon to cancel out the negative associations. We are specifically working with Bangladeshi boys around hesitancy in taking part in dance.

“You can never disband gangs – it’s in human nature to gather in groups. Group and gang culture is often seen as negative, but gangs aren’t innately negative – it’s all about your codes and ethics within the gang. There are so many definitions of gangs – there are groups, gangs, and affiliates of gangs.

“Gangs often revolve around territorial issues and a sense of belonging – this is why young people form postcode gangs. In actuality, wannabe gangs are more dangerous than established gangsters in that they are striving for something that isn’t in their current experience.

“We wouldn’t want to take away gangs, but we want to help young people to examine what they gain from a gang, and what they lose. It’s about exploring value systems.”

It should be recognised that the police are playing a major part in early intervention. They are involved in restorative justice; provide “intelligence-led” information which is linked into YIP and YISP; run the Police Cadets programme; and both Operation Curb and Operation Blunt aim to work with young people before they get in trouble. The police also liaise tactically with the YOT.

Tower Hamlets LAPs are currently engaged with over 12,000 young people. According to its area director, findings indicate that young people still associate themselves very strongly with territorial boundaries, and “negative perspectives” are held by the young people:

“There are questions of how parents and families can protect young people from crime, and where parents should go if their child is victimized. The key to involving youth is to engage with them in a way that they feel has positive ramifications for them. A flexibility of approach is vital.

“We need to be more creative about how we engage young people. We’ve tried to accomplish this by meeting with young people on their own turf and in their own timeframes. We’ve considered using video conferencing as a means of getting young people in different boroughs to communicate with one another.

“We need to build up support networks within our communities. Rather than having troubled individuals completely dependent on services, we need to get neighbours to support one another.”

So how do we get neighbours to support one another? In the next chapter this report will look at groups trying to build bridges – and break cycles.



The fifth commission session took place on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2008 and was headed: *'The community's relationship with our young people – building bridges.'* Issues addressed included strengthening the links between the generations, the treatment of offenders in custody, licensing issues and problems on public transport.

One recurring theme during the course of this commission has been that the perception of lawless streets, rampaging youths and violent gangs is one held by many older people. Although the media must shoulder some of the blame, part of this fear is based on ignorance.

Older people tend to be intimidated by groups of young people, and there is often an assumption to believe they are "up to no good", even when they are just socialising. Partly young people congregate because they feel safe, and partly because it's fun; they often congregate on the street either because there's nowhere else to go or it's simply where they want to be.

A key factor in breaking down the fear of crime is to find ways for people from different generations to understand each other. Many older people are frightened of young people, often without reason; likewise, many young people believe older people are to be feared or unworthy of respect.

**Box quote**

"Young people need to be aware that it is the number one priority of the police to ensure their safety. If they come to us for help, we will help. Knife crime is something we can beat best by working together. Crime is already falling and that's a result of better and more responsive policing and the recognition that young people who carry knives are at greater risk of being imprisoned, permanently disfigured, or killed."

**Chief Sup Paul Rickett, Metropolitan Police**

The Commission heard from "Magic Me", a voluntary organisation that has operated in Tower Hamlets for over 25 years, with a mandate to bring together the generations. This group works with schools and youth groups and brings them together with social groups and day centres for older people.

Both young and older people who have participated in schemes organised by "Magic Me" have found it beneficial in many ways. Older people have found younger people jobs; younger people said it showed them that older people shared many of their concerns and wanted many of the same things.

According to one young participant, "the scheme enabled me to see my own teachers in a new way, and my education has consequently improved." Another said that "my relationship with my own parents has improved."

One older person said she felt much more confident going out in her community while another said that projects that bring together different sets of people can make an enormous difference in their community and the wider world.

Situated at the heart of the borough, and serving students from across the borough and beyond its boundaries, Tower Hamlets College has a unique perspective on real and perceived problems with gangs and crime. The

college's ethnic profile broadly matches that of Tower Hamlets as a whole, and with most students arriving on public transport violence in the surrounding streets used to be a serious problem.

A combination of strategies has vastly improved things both for the staff and students at the college and the wider community in the area surrounding the campus. A senior college representative explained:

"The college has a strong discipline procedure which has a profound effect outside campus. Exclusions are preceded by Final Warnings. Tower Hamlets College offers counselling for troubled students. The police Safer Schools Officers also offer reassurance to young people and parents.

"In addition, the Safer Schools Procedure installs metal detectors at intervals to root out weapons and uses knife arches without prior notice. When the knife arch was used no students were found to be carrying anything warranting arrest. Our schools and colleges are very safe environments, and knife arches are just one of several overlapping strategies aimed at keeping them safe for learning.

"A lot of time goes into working with the police and there are many leisure and extra-curricular activities on offer. The school has well-established guidance counsellors who are supported by student peer mentors; there is academic and vocational mentoring; and the college works actively with the parents or extended families of young people who get themselves in trouble, in order to resolve their behaviour."

Many young people who commit serious crime and anti-social behaviour are under the influence of alcohol. What can be done to tighten up the sale of alcohol to minors? The Commission heard from a council officer who works in licensing:

"In England and Wales there are 19800 licensed premises. When boroughs took over licensing the number of licenses granted across London decreased. In Tower Hamlets however, there has been a significant growth of licensed premises since 2005. This runs counter to the national trend.

"In addition, the sales in off-premise alcohol (purchased in off-licenses or supermarkets) have grown. It is thought that the recession will further aggravate this. The Government has new initiatives around responsible drinking, particularly with reference to cutting back on Happy Hours at pubs; however it's my opinion that until stricter laws are passed down governing the sale of alcohol in off-licenses and supermarkets, the Governments' new initiatives will only accelerate off-premise drinking.

"We have young police cadets that are used as mystery shoppers to root out establishments that will sell to those who are underage. Unfortunately it's very difficult to monitor underage drinking as most of the alcohol consumed by youth is obtained at home from parents or older siblings, not from illegal sales.

"It should be noted that young people drinking at home isn't illegal – it's only illegal to sell alcohol to them outside the home. The decision to prosecute has always been down to the discretion of the service. This raises the issue of responsible parenting.

“The Government’s view is that it’s not the responsibility of the Government to prevent underage drinking, but rather of the parents and families. The issues surrounding under-age drinking aren’t just to do with whether youth can purchase it, it’s about the degree of access they have to it from a variety of sources.

“The assertion that youth are getting alcohol from home might not be a relevant one for this particular borough due to the demographics. Many families in the borough have religious reasons for not purchasing or consuming alcohol. However, often older gang members or siblings are purchasing alcohol for younger gang members or siblings.”

Part of the reason young people drink and take drugs is because of boredom. A frequent complaint (and excuse) for teenage misbehaviour is that there is “nothing to do”. Yet Tower Hamlets is very well served by projects catering for young people. A representative of Brady Art Centre explained how art can divert young peoples’ energies into positive activities:

“Our centre hosts arts courses and workshops including dance, drama, music technology, fashion, film and singing. We have theatre space and gallery space for small exhibitions. Art can help channel young people’s energy in positive ways.

“We host regular sessions on Thursday evenings, and the rest of our outreach work happens through youth clubs. We have a small team – two full time equivalent workers. We ran 59 art projects with 13-18 year olds in 2007-2008.

“We run our projects through co-operation with the Rapid Response Team and the Children Looked after Service (CLAS). We also work in museums and galleries around the capital. We’re currently looking at running a program that will result in accrediting for youth who don’t have traditional GCSEs. We also work with awards from the Arts Council and the AQA Awards.

“Our focus is on projects that attract hard-to-reach young men. The projects encompass art forms such as film (we allow the youth to pick their own stories to tell), graffiti and street art, rap, and music technology.

“Transport issues are one of the things that limit the amount of young people that can access our services. There is a mobile bus service run by the Rapid Response Team – we could do with more services like this.

“A key way we’ve found to engage with youth is to hold competitions where the prizes are sought after by young people, such as Play Stations, but the concern with this method is that it may not lead to repeat engagement by youth.

“Community cohesion is a concern, but we don’t work as much with young children or parents. We do, however find that processions and shows are a good way to involve the wider community. A lot of people think youth are a threat or a nuisance, but our work helps their voices to be heard.

“We often come across young people who feel they’ve got nowhere to go, but in fact this isn’t accurate, as they have places to go, but simply do not want to go there. Transport is definitely an issue – we could get more youth

to the centre if we had transport. I feel that youth provision has been rather poor up until now, but this is now being addressed.”

#### **Lessons learned, further actions**

##### **Box quote**

“Restorative justice is proving an incredibly effective way to help young people confront their own actions. It’s not just about improving poor behaviour; the emotional literacy of young people is developed, both bullies and the bullied express their feelings, and responsibility for finding a way forward is down to those involved rather than a third party.”

**Sally Bentley, Head of Thames Youth Magistrates Bench**

The sixth session of the Commission took place on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008 and was headed: “*Resources and the 3 year strategy for the Council for safeguarding our young people*”. Subjects up for discussion included restorative justice within schools and the work of organisations like the New Destiny Trust.

The Commission heard evidence from the authors of a report into gang related crime in Islington. LBI’s Commission on Young People’s Services and Safety was set up to determine the extent of knife crime in the

borough and also looked at gun crime. The commission came about as a result of the death of a 14 year old boy which attracted national publicity.

Islington Council's Integrated Strategy was to focus on youth violence and gang prevention, youth disorder, integrated services for young people such as positive activities for young people, information and guidance. The strategy also looked at parenting and family support and other strategies such as Mental Health Strategy.

The resources used to achieve these recommendations included the Youth Engagement Team, which focused on police officers and youth workers with an ability to engage young people; the Gang Exit and Disruption Team, made up of outgoing members of gangs; and the Parenting Supporting Service.

A major problem when it comes to dissuading young people from joining gangs is that the lifestyle of a "gangster" is seen as glamorous to some young people. One way to dispel this notion is to invite former criminals who have been to prison to talk to young people in a school or youth project setting to speak about their experiences and warn of the dangers involved in such a lifestyle.

During an earlier session of the commission, the work of Southwark-based New Destiny Trust was presented. The project is focused on ex-criminals and gang members telling their stories to young people, usually within secondary schools, who are opinion-formers or have been identified as being on the borderline of crime.

Two members of the commission were selected to go and witness the New Destiny Trust "in action" as an example of best practice. Here are their findings:

"The New Destiny Trust uses carefully vetted and selected long-term ex-prisoners, whose aim is to deter young people from joining or condoning all forms of gang culture, knife and gun crime, and antisocial behaviour (including bullying, drugs and alcohol).

"They do this by identifying with the sharp edge of crime through personal testimonials (building credibility with their audience), explaining to the young people present the brutally unpleasant realities of prison life, and how they should avoid becoming involved with criminal or borderline criminal activity.

"Suitable staff are carefully selected for this type of work, which is as much about passion and conviction as it is about paid employment. All staff are CRB checked at the highest level, they undergo 'be safe' training, and then more detailed training in role play, tackling sensitive issues, dealing with pupils' questions (however frank and personal), and their own personal presentation skills.

"The work takes a number of forms – addressing school assemblies, PHSE lessons, small group work, and where appropriate, mentoring. A favoured method is small group work. The project currently works within one school in Tower Hamlets, and they are keen to expand. Funding comes from a variety of sources including the Police, Councils and individual schools, but remains a key area of anxiety.

"We observed a 1.5 hour session with a group of Year 9 pupils (13-14 years old) at a school in South London. The session we witnessed was in a low level disruption class. The men gave a very effective presentation – the

students were spellbound. The students could relate to their language and behaviour - the men used street language, without swearing.

"The session handled why people form gangs and people gave reasons such as friends and protection. We were impressed by their credibility, their positive impact on the students, and by their ambition for these young people to change. The session was very effective and the students asked when the men would be coming back."

The commission is keen to promote organizations such as the New Destiny Trust and expand their role within the borough. Illustrating the horrors of life inside is one effective way of enabling young people to think hard about their actions and the possible consequences.

Young people are only ever locked up as a last resort. Those young people who become wrapped up within the justice system need more help when in custody and more support when they are released so that they don't re-offend.

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) has three main objectives: to reduce offending, to ensure public protection and to ensure better outcomes for young people in custody. YJB also works with The London Crime Prevention Board, formed by the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister. YJB was developed to focus on Restorative Justice for Young Offenders, prevent anti-crime extremities and organize programs.

Currently the YJB is looking into the establishment of a brand new secure accommodation centre in East London. The "East Potential" Academy would provide complete support for young offenders, all within a single setting, close to the communities in which the young people grew up, as a witness explained:

"The YJB is looking at overcoming the legal and financial issues of East Potential's bid, and there are a number of other issues that we must address. For example, it's not always the best option to bring first time offenders into custody together with those with multiple convictions, as they have different needs.

"In order to support the YJB in tackling crime & safeguarding young people, local authorities can play an important role. First, we would like them to address the way in which they respond to crime in schools and colleges. Secondly, youngsters in custody could get better resettlement procedures through better electronic information as it can be hard to engage with offenders.

"Finally we would prefer that the Courts don't send young people to custody on short prison sentences (117 days and under) because what can be achieved in that period to attain nominalization is limited."

## **Summary**

### **Box quote**

"A great deal of crime is taking place which we as adults never notice. Young people are often living in fear and it

is our responsibility to them to both ensure they can go about their lives in safety and also that they realise adults and the community are *on their side*.”

**Toks Adesuyan, Borough Crown Prosecutor, Tower Hamlets**

In order to combat anti-social behaviour and violent crime, the Commission has compiled a list of recommendations that will have a real impact both on levels of crime, and the perception of crime, within Tower Hamlets.

There are no short-term or easy solutions, but what is certain is that these problems can only be tackled using a multi-agency approach: education, employment, schools, community support, parents, health, housing, safeguarding, police, youth service, licensing, all must play a part and all must be pulling in the same direction, ensuring resources, information and experiences are shared.

There is some confusion nationally about whether knife crime in particular is getting better or worse. Statistics can be used in many ways and the commission has relied on them only where they are both unambiguous and illuminating. Otherwise we have focussed on what has been learnt and what can be done.

Young people need to be educated as to both their rights and their responsibilities. They need to be informed what's acceptable, what's unacceptable, where they can and can't go.

Having listened to submissions from the YISP parents and from the social inclusion teams about bullying, it became clear that, for young people, safety begins at home, and then extends into schools and the streets. The commission commended a dual approach

- “Think Family” – encouraging the approach of strengthening families, and keeping the family at the heart of service delivery (the YISP and FIP were both good examples, so was a lot of the work in schools)
- Restorative Justice, which over time brought together victims and perpetrators to break down barriers and combat received impressions.

A key theme that came up time and again during this Commission was the complaint that there simply aren't enough places for young people to go, particularly during the evenings, weekends and holidays. Many youth centres close down around 9pm, and often young people don't want to go home because of overcrowding. However, some within the commission believe that youth clubs can often exacerbate tensions and certainly don't provide a complete solution.

We believe that the infrastructure is well embedded to deliver positive change for our local communities: but the challenge is to develop the vision of “One Tower Hamlets” where young people value their community, and the community supports young people to fulfil their optimum potential.

Rates of exclusion from school are lower in Tower Hamlets than in most boroughs. The link between exclusion from school and gang membership is well documented, as was noted in “Groups, Gangs & Weapons”:

***“The majority of young people excluded from mainstream said they had carried a knife within the last year.” (7)***

Education needs to be more relevant to the young people it serves. Young people need to be educated better as to their rights and their responsibilities. More resources need investing in young people with learning or behavioural problems. Young people need to be shown other routes to a successful and happy adulthood. New technology can have a detrimental impact on how young people behave. Where once fights took a lot of organising, giving those involved time to cool down, now mobile phones mean back-up can be summoned almost instantly.

Similarly, the emergence of social networking sites (YouTube, Bebo, Myspace, Facebook etc) makes it much easier for gangs to boast about their own notoriety; this has a self-sustaining impact. At the same time, more young people (even those from relatively modest backgrounds) are now carrying mobiles, iPods etc, and are easy prey for muggings.

One driving force of much of the crime both in Tower Hamlets and elsewhere is drugs. By taking illicit drugs young people immediately become part of a sub-culture, isolate themselves from mainstream society. Even “soft” drugs like cannabis lead young people into difficult situations, forcing them to mingle with dangerous criminals.

The reasons why young people take drugs are complex: boredom; peer pressure; because drug provides temporary relief from their lives; and (in the beginning, at any rate) drugs can feel good. We need to demonstrate that there are other ways to alleviate boredom; that saying “no” to your friends is a sign of strength; that the world is full of possibilities; that drugs often lead to alienation, poverty, ill-health, criminalisation and death.

One of this Commission’s findings has been that some young people have actual or *perceived* problems travelling to other areas. The “postcode problem” seems over-stated, and even within the Commission some believe that the only young people who have real problems moving freely around the borough are those who are up to no good. On this, as with many subjects (the usefulness of knife arches, for instance), there is a healthily divergent range of opinion.

What most of the Commission did agree on was that the problems around gang culture and violent crime are mainly to do with young men. According to the UCL report, “guns, gangs & weapons”:

***“Gangs are mostly male. Although school surveys suggest that just as many girls as boys claimed to be part of a gang, such gangs were not ones with a territory or name. This suggests that girls may be more involved with peer group collectives than street gang-level collectives. The literature supports this with little evidence to support the speculation that female involvement is increasing. Where females are involved in gang activities, it is thought their role might be one of support, such as carrying or storing weapons.” (4)***

Though some other boroughs have female gangs, this is not a real problem in Tower Hamlets. However, young women are often the victims of gang-related violence.



Another recurring theme has been the dearth of suitable adult role models, particularly male role models for teenage boys. Parents need more support if they feel their child is out of control. More case workers need to be recruited for groups like the YISP. Restorative justice should be promoted so long as there is evidence it works. And more resources need to be invested to support 18-25 year olds moving out of youth services. These are just a few of the many recommendations that make up this report.

Although Tower Hamlets is safer than other parts of London, just as there is a danger in overstating the problem, there is an equal danger in understating the case.

As adults we sometimes forget there are two worlds. Crime in the younger world could involve two youths and an adult onlooker would not know a crime was taking place: a mugging could be occurring but to the untrained eye the young people are just "messaging around".

This low-level crime, unseen or unnoticed by most of us, is affecting young people all around us every day. We should all do our utmost to ensure that young people grow up free from fear, free to travel and enjoy childhood. If this Commission helps bring that about, then all the sterling efforts put in by all the witnesses, young people and Commission members themselves will have been worthwhile.

## **Recommendations**

Having received and heard evidence from various sources, the commission is confident that Tower Hamlets offers a very good environment in which most of the residents, most of the time, can live and learn safely and happily. The recommendations from the commissioners address the exceptional circumstances when young people are at risk, and the environment is less secure.

The recommendations below represent the broad thinking of the commissioners, in response to the evidence presented. Against each recommendation we have referenced the sessions from which these were principally drawn, but we should emphasise that conclusions are not mutually exclusive, and recommendations emerge from evidence received throughout the process. The next tier of recommendations will be expressed in the action plan drafted by officers, and contained in the borough's youth justice and community safety plans. Commissioners ask that the relevant sections within these plans should be highlighted so that progress can be easily monitored.

### **1. One Tower Hamlets**

Commissioners noted that there was a disparity between the image and the reality of safety in the borough. In particular, the reputation of young people and the quality of community relations suffered from sensationalist reporting in some newspapers and television programmes. As a result there was a danger of a culture of fear developing, between cultures and generations. Commissioners were convinced that we should counter this with positive reporting and celebrating the successes in the borough. We must value

distinct cultures in the borough, drawing together young people and adults, and helping young people from different ethnic backgrounds to mix easily. We should:

- Ensure young people's representation to feed into local structures charged with preventing and reducing crime and anti-social behaviour, in particular the crime and drugs reduction partnership. (Sessions 3, 4)
- Promote and fund inter-generational working in the borough (Session 4)
- Promote and fund work across ethnic boundaries
- Develop and encourage volunteering schemes for the Olympics, where young people and adults work closely together (Sessions 3, 4)
- Endorse positive action schemes for young people (Session 2, 3, 5)

## **2. A Great Place to Live**

Commissioners want to promote a sense of belonging, and confidence in the out-door environment. A further example of the disparity between popular belief and evidence is the relatively high fear of crime when actual crime has fallen over the last 7 years. This anxiety, however, can lead to heightened tension. Significant anecdotal evidence was presented by young people about post-code tensions, and there was some evidence of street fighting across boundaries.

We should:

- Narrow the gap between perceptions and the evidence and avoid the vilification of young people (Session 1, 3, 6)
- Encourage the Police Authority to identify ways of strengthening the relationship between the police and young people (Sessions 1, 3, 6)
- Ensure resources are directed towards early intervention/family projects (e.g. YIP, YISP & FIP). (Session 2,4, 6)
- Promote the value of Play within the borough, and improve playgrounds and parks to encourage, safe, imaginative and inclusive play. (Session 4)
- Focus support for young people on the transition period between the end of primary, and the start of secondary school (Session 4)
- Encourage young people's mobility across the borough, continuing to develop safe routes to school and to play, particularly when moving between areas and postcodes (Sessions 1, 3, 5,)

## **3. A Prosperous Community**

Much evidence was presented to demonstrate that full engagement with educational and leisure activities, and familiarity local democratic processes, militated against individual anti-social behaviour, encouraged reporting, and increased public confidence. Young people and their families prospered when they were actively engaged in their community and confident in dealing with public affairs.

Engagement with the rich learning experience provided inside and outside schools and colleges was seen as central to full social engagement. Commissioners were clear that promoting educational, artistic, sporting and

cultural opportunities within the borough would divert many young people from poor behaviour and under-achievement. We should:

- Ensure a broad range of high quality activities within youth centres, and secure specialist programmes, as necessary, to re-engage young people who are in difficulty. (Sessions 2, 5)
- Include a strong focus upon the arts and creative projects for 'hard to reach' groups (Session 5)
- Through the 14 – 19 strategy, ensure young people have every opportunity to improve their skills levels (in particular social & communication skills) to prepare them adequately for training and work (Sessions 2, 5)
- Provide good accommodation, support, and training or employment for all young people leaving custody, in line with the local re-settlement pledge (Sessions 5, 6)

#### **4. A Safe and Supportive Community**

Commissioners found that for some young people the borough did not always offer a positive environment. Evidence of girls and young women becoming victims of prostitution was presented clearly, and special services were indicated in this area. Commissioners were particularly impressed with evidence (from the police, schools, and a number of third sector organisations) on the use of Restorative Justice across agencies as a key model of working with young people.

Commissioners want to ensure that every effort is made to sustain a safe environment in which young people can live and thrive.

We should:

- Draft a protocol on the use of restorative justice across the borough and identify resources for central training at initial, intermediate and advanced levels. (Sessions 3, 4, 5 & 6)
- Try new approaches to diversion whereby ex-offenders work with young gang members to de-glamorize crime and divert these youngsters (Session 2)
- Support young people to resist bullying in and out of school, linking with anti-bullying policies and restorative justice, as above. Raise awareness of the policies and encourage their effective implementation. (Sessions 3 & 4)
- Prioritise early intervention strategies and positive engagement of families, in particular working with families of young offenders, and with children in families with adult offenders (Sessions 2, 4 & 6)
- Ensure an accurate information exchange between agencies and up-to-date protocols (Sessions 1, 2, 6)

#### **5. A Healthy Community**

The Commission heard compelling medical evidence on serious injury, and the lifelong effects, both physical and psychological. The Consultant Trauma Surgeon at the Royal London Hospital presented his perspective of a 'parental postcode': those children raised in poverty may be less likely to adequately safeguard their

own children, and this cycle perpetuates. The commission warmly welcomed the offer from the trauma unit to develop close liaison with the authority.

Evidence from licensing and the drugs specialists influenced thinking in particular on the availability of alcohol in relation to public order and petty crime. The supply of illegal drugs was a concern both in relation to health and as an introduction to criminal networks. We should:

- Implement the borough's strategy for the Reduction of Child Poverty (Session 1)
- Establish the link with the trauma unit. ( Session 1)
- Provide more information to young people about knife crime and its consequences (Session 1)
- Improve the disclosure between the police and NHS around knife crime injuries (Session 1)
- Increase intelligence sharing and positive partnership working in order that the evidence that the supply of drugs to young people is significantly reduced (Session 4)
- Target the known criminal gangs in the borough, and focus on the families of those young people known to associate with the gangs. (Session 2, 4, 6)
- Look at ways of ensuring licensees, parents and older siblings are held to account for an unchecked pattern of underage drinking (Session 5)

### **Acknowledgments**

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- Heather Mallinder, Tower Hamlets Anti-Social Behaviour Unit
- Hub Travel Report

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- Thanos Morphitis, Peter Murphy, Peter Moore, LB Islington
- The Commission would particularly like to thank all the young people who attended and gave such impressive evidence at Sessions 3, 4 & 5.

#### **References**

1. Tower Hamlets Residents Panel Consultation report (March 2008)
2. "Equality Impact Assessment of the Home Office Youth Crime Action Plan" (DCSF, July 2008)
3. LB of Islington's Commission on Young People's Services and Safety (March 2008)
4. "Rationalisation of current research on guns, gangs and other weapons" (UCL, November 2005)
5. "Five Borough Alliance: Guidance for the Communications Strategy" (UCL, August 2007)
6. "Building Bridges Project: Executive Summary" (ROTA, July 2008)
7. "Groups, gangs & weapons" (Youth Justice Board, 2007)

#### **Further reading**

"2020 Vision" Tower Hamlets Community Plan

Summary of Youth Crime Action Plan (July 2008)

The Hub Report: Learner Travel: to facilitate 14-19 pathways & Borough wide Campus April 2008

Translations

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