

# Local partnerships are effective in preventing the spread of gangs and gang violence. The government can't afford not to invest in them.

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*Ramifications of this summer's riots are still being felt. For some local authorities though, action was already being taken, even before the riots, to address the gang culture that some have blamed for causing the disturbances. Here, [Cllr Chris Robbins](#), Council Leader of the London Borough of Waltham Forest, discusses an approach being taken by the Borough that he believes is working.*

Last week, the Coalition Government published its gangs' strategy, [Ending Gang and Youth Violence](#). Over recent months, Waltham Forest has been giving evidence to MPs and Ministers about our own gang prevention programme, [Enough is Enough](#), which we believe has achieved a level of success that is worth exploring.

The riots that our borough and London experienced in August 2011 have led to a great deal of reflection. However, for Waltham Forest this wasn't the wake-up call it was for many. *Enough is Enough* launched in January this year after five years' work with the police, academics, the voluntary sector and policy experts. It was clear to all the partners involved that more action was needed to tackle gangs in our community, and that this was going to involve a new and radical approach. Recognising the complexity of factors that can draw young people into gang culture, *Enough is Enough* offers a balanced, intelligence-led approach in order to bring about long-term behavioural change. It involves support to individuals and families, tough enforcement for criminal behaviour, multiple stakeholder agencies, and invaluable partnerships with the community and voluntary sector. Since we launched *Enough is Enough*, there has been a marked decline in crime levels in Waltham Forest. Serious youth violence has declined by almost a quarter, gun crime has fallen by over 30% and knife crime and personal robberies have recorded double-digit percentage decreases. The programme also delivers long-term financial savings and we are in the process of commissioning a high quality evaluation partner for a longitudinal study into the full outcomes of the programme.

## **The scale of the problem**

It would be wrong to paint an entirely negative picture of Waltham Forest, but at the same time we have been honest with ourselves and admit that there *is* a problem. This problem revolves around a handful of people and places, but the impact they have – whether it is the crimes they commit or the fear they instil in those around them – is something that we felt could no longer be tolerated.

Waltham Forest is the 6<sup>th</sup> most deprived borough in London, the 15<sup>th</sup> nationally. In a population of 247,000, we have nine main gangs with up to 400 associate members – not nearly the worst in London. We had good understanding of our gangs from a piece of work carried out by [Professor John Pitts in 2007](#), and after a spate violence last summer, we did literally say enough is enough and began to develop new interventions to take forward our considerable intelligence base.

## **Waltham Forest and the riots**

Waltham Forest was geographically at the centre of the disturbances we witnessed in August – we border Haringey, Hackney and Enfield – yet we escaped the worst of what happened. Tottenham Hale Business Park, one of the worst affected areas, is a few hundred metres from our boundary.

There was less criminal damage and disorder in Waltham Forest compared to these neighbouring boroughs as well as those with similar deprivation profiles. There were 70 damaged businesses, 54 people charged and 31 residents arrested, with half of these believed to have gang affiliations. Whilst this remains devastating to those affected, the difference in damage to that which our neighbours experienced is marked. If not the complete answer, we feel sure that our prevention programme played a part in this.

### **Partnership approach**

Intelligence was critical to the borough's response to the riots. The excellent relationships that we have built up with the police and now, through *Enough is Enough*, with the community meant that reliable information was forthcoming through a number of different channels. The Borough Commander and his team were excellent throughout the disturbances, and the intelligence we were being given by the community made pre-emptive action possible. I myself was contacted by a young member of the community with information about the rumours that were circulating about the timing and location of disruption prior to the first night of disturbances.

We have a committee of local people working with us – the Better Way Partnership – which brings together unparalleled resources in terms of advice, talent and experience. This partnership is the driving force of all of our work on gangs. They are the credible and informed link to the communities who are experiencing the effects of living with gangs, and bring challenge, support and delivery to everyone working in this area.

### **Intensive whole family engagement**

Through the *Enough is Enough* Family Partnership Team we are working with individuals, families and communities in a way that I don't think you will find anywhere else in the country. The intensive work that they do to support whole families blighted by gangs means that they are not just helping the gang member to a better life, but working to make sure that the next generation of that family can see a different choice.

Working with the police, we identified the most difficult families in the borough and are working with them to offer an alternative way of life. Behavioural change is enabled through incorporating a range of actions that stress the existence of a clear and persistent offer of support, through education, training, work, health and housing, balanced against an understanding that there is clear consequence for continuing criminal behaviour. Twenty-seven families have been identified for the first interventions and the engagement rate stands at 80 per cent. Through the work of the multi-agency team young people have started attending college or training courses, secured apprenticeships and successfully gained employment in the retail industry. Not only this, but parents have been involved in job training and the job market, sometimes for the first time in their lives.

Elements of our approach in Waltham Forest can be seen in the Government's recently announced strategy, particularly the focus on prevention and 'pathways out' as well as the emphasis on partnership and cross-agency working. I firmly believe, and our programme shows this, that local authorities are the only agency who can be at the centre of gang prevention, of course working extremely closely with the

police and the community. In my mind, the wider social costs of gang activity on communities make it a social and political imperative.

There is much to be commended in the Government's strategy. Needless to say, the implementation of any national strategy needs to reflect local needs and circumstances. Councils are a crucial partner in delivering this and, as we have seen in Waltham Forest even over the past few months, the hard work of joined up and committed partners can deliver a tangible improvement.

### **Cost of Action and Inaction**

All of this comes with a cost. In the worst budget year of recent times, the Council committed almost £1 million of new money to the programme this year alone. It is a concern that the Government have only announced £1.2 million of new money to support their gang strategy – almost the same as we have committed for one year.

The drop in crime experienced in the first six months of our programme is estimated to have saved the public purse £2.3 million. This is set against an estimated cost of £21,000 to put one family through a tailored programme. Our experience, therefore, is that this is one investment the Government can't afford not to make.

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