

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SELECT COMMITTEE - KNIFE CRIME IN KENT

MINUTES of a meeting of the Select Committee - Knife Crime in Kent held in the Medway Room - Sessions House on Wednesday, 12 June 2019.

PRESENT: Mr P V Barrington-King (Chairman), Mrs S Chandler, Mr I S Chittenden, Mr A Cook, Mr P C Cooper, Mr D Farrell, Mr A R Hills, Mr K Pugh and Mr A M Ridgers

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr G Romagnuolo (Research Officer - Overview and Scrutiny) and Mrs A Taylor (Scrutiny Research Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

1. Apologies
(Item 1)

There were no apologies for absence. Mr Paul Cooper would join the meeting on the rise of Planning Committee.

2. Dr Erin Sanders-McDonagh (Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Kent)
(Item 2)

1. The Chairman welcomed Dr Erin Sanders-McDonagh to the meeting. Erin worked as a senior lecturer in Criminology at the University of Kent having received her PhD at the University of Nottingham in 2010.

2. Erin's most recent project was with the New Horizon Youth Centre in London, working with their Youth Offending Project Team on the best ways of tackling re-offending and improving the lives of young people who were gang affiliated.

3. Through her work with young people Erin had asked about their early lives to try to determine what would make a 14-year-old carry a knife. The recurring themes were their early years, home circumstances and background which generally included violence or trauma. Exclusion from school was also a big factor.

4. Homelessness also had a huge impact, young people often found themselves street homeless because their parents were unable to cope with their behaviour. Homelessness could prompt the move into the drug trade because the young people need money and somewhere to stay. The majority of young people involved in gangs sold drugs and were often exploited into selling drugs for somewhere to stay.

5. Erin was an advocate of third sector organisations, they often elicited positive change and were vital in helping young people to move out of County Lines into safer spaces and to enable them to make better decisions.

6. Erin also highlighted mental health as a huge issue, many young people she had spoken to suffered from Reactive Attachment Disorder, some displayed psychopathic traits, many had PTSD and almost all had signs of anxiety and depression.

7. Erin explained that, in her experience, loneliness and social isolation also was a recurring theme, the young people did not have trusting relationships and ended up in gang related activity, in the future it then becomes very difficult to trust people and to make connections and to make positive changes young people have to be able to trust someone.

8. Erin discussed cycles of vulnerability with Members, this involved exploitation with older gang members influencing younger gang members and this being a cycle of the young people replicating what they experience themselves.

9. New Horizon was working to prevent young people from being gang involved, it was very difficult to get them out of the gang culture once they had entered it and it became increasingly difficult to rebuild new lives. To prevent the cycle repeating it was essential to look at early years' intervention (0-3years). Sure Start was an excellent example of bridging the gap with young people and giving advice to parents. Erin advised that it was important to ensure that Sure Start was well funded in addition to Social Workers. She also considered that education was key, more support was needed in schools for young people where teachers saw the young people daily.

10. Erin gave an example of a gang project in London which worked very well, Islington XXXX they had a clinical psychologist which allowed the assessment of young people's mental health needs.

11. It was considered that the British Transport Police had a role to play in being proactive to support young people on trains when required, much of the county lines work involved train routes.

12. Members asked the following questions:

13. Referring to sport mentoring there was evidence in the US that sport had major benefits in many ways, including team working and team building. Sport should be incorporated into youth offending systems.

14. Exclusions from school – were there better ways of dealing with exclusions from schools? Erin explained that excluding students was one of the biggest risk factors in a young person becoming gang affiliated. Pupil Referral Units also often led young people into offending. Early exclusions were most damaging and it was incredibly difficult to re-engage with young people who had been excluded from school at age 12. Members also raised concerns about home teaching. The Member considered that in deprived areas breakfast clubs and after school clubs were essential to ensure that children did not go home to an empty house.

15. Was there any correlation between youth services, social services and a lack of money? Erin considered that the problems had increased as a result of austerity.

16. In response to a question about the understanding of policy makers in terms of research on this topic Erin considered that it was a multifaceted problem. Policy makers often wanted an easy answer. From the life history interviews Erin had done with young people the problems started from a young age, doing more to support young people in poverty seemed like the most important thing to do. It was also important to work with

young people who were already gang involved. The third sector had a lot to offer and sustainable funding (5 year funding) was key.

17. Erin considered that the cause of the recent increase in knife crime was due to austerity, it was not caused by Drill Music or the sale of ceramic knife. Violence had become normalised; the police had a role to play but she did not think that the targeted stop and search worked particularly well. If young people got a sense that the Police were less adversarial, they were more likely to turn to them, Police presence was important.

18. In relation to Drill Music, young people listened to this because it was part of their culture, Erin did not consider that this was driving knife crime. It was not unrelated, but it was not the cause. Removing videos from YouTube was an easy win but it was not going to solve the problem.

19. Regarding homelessness it was considered that this was key, Erin explained to Members that New Horizon had tried to use a social isolation scale (similar to formerly used anger management and aggression scale) but they had had to remove it because young people were not comfortable filling it in. New Horizon worked well because it didn't use a timeframe for working with young people. Erin explained to Members that many of the young people would always sell drugs but if they did so and didn't commit violence then that could be considered a positive, it was important to set the bar low in the first instance so young people felt like they were making positive changes.

20. Erin considered that primary schools were fundamentally important, having counselling services embedded in a school meant that the burden was removed from teachers, using schools was an efficient way of tackling issues before they became a problem. This was often considered expensive but if you compared this to the cost of a murder trial this was financially advantageous.

21. Discussing the role of the third sector Members questioned the requirements of the people they were helping. Members considered that young people were not always able to maintain the required regime so dropped out quickly. There were many fantastic organisations, but the variety and type meant little consistency. Referring to the role of primary schools a member considered that a lot of schools were resistant to the suggestion that there should be an extension of their remit in a holistic way.

22. In response to a question about County Lines Erin explained that they were usually run by 1 or 2 people, sometimes 3. They needed a permanent link in the home county and usually moved into the home of a vulnerable resident and enticed them with drugs for example. Young people were then recruited to do the running and selling of drugs in the county and to move the cash back to London.

23. A Member asked why cocaine had evolved in a different way? Erin explained that most of the violence in London related to crack and heroine and turf wars. Most of the people buying crack were doing so because that was what they could afford, those using cocaine were usually middle class. A special skill set was needed to sell drugs to middle class people, the use of a car and the ability to talk to people. Many gang members were not able to move into that market, not for lack of trying or desire.

24. Members discussed the fact that even if a couple of people were taken out of the system there were always plenty of young people behind them waiting to take their places. Erin supported this and explained that the young people could earn more money selling drugs that they ever could in a normal job. However there was no long term gain

because it was difficult to launder money, selling drugs resulted in them going back to jail and they were not going to be able to spend money unless they moved away from crime.

25. A Member asked if there was any good news, was there any evidence of a drop in drug use? Erin explained that there was no good news, she considered that until a lot more drugs were decriminalised there was not going to be any change. Erin highlighted Portugal as a good example of successful decriminalisation. The New Horizon project worked with young people aged 16-25, it was not the role of the team to be judgemental about young people selling drugs but to listen if they were concerned about violence and how they felt about violence. Almost all of the people within the project had been a victim of stabbing or had seen someone stabbed. Most of the young people didn't want to hurt or kill anyone but if they had to defend themselves they didn't want to be the only person without a knife. It was not possible to separate knife crime from social deprivation and poverty.

26. A Member referred to young people having a good relationship with policemen, and the role of community wardens working with young families. Erin considered that having someone in the community for families to turn to would have been ideal, if the family did not consider police involvement necessary or appropriate.

27. The Chairman concluded the meeting by offering the Committees sincere thanks to Dr Erin Sanders-McDonagh for the extremely useful information she had presented. He hoped that she had been able to cover everything she wanted to, but if there was any further information she wanted the Select Committee to consider she was welcome to forward it.

3. Mark Pearson (Chief Executive Officer, Excelsior Safeguarding) *(Item 3)*

1. The Chairman welcomed Mark Pearson, Chief Executive Officer, Excelsior Safeguarding C.I.C to the meeting. Excelsior Safeguarding was a 'not-for-profit' organisation established to provide effective help and support to vulnerable young people and adults affected by group violence, drugs and other forms of criminal exploitation.

2. Mr Pearson delivered a presentation to the Select Committee which is available to view [online via this link](#).

3. Mr Pearson explained that it was not possible to separate the criminal exploitation issues such as exploitation by organised gangs to deal drugs, sexual exploitation and extremism which can co-exist and that knife crime was a key component.

4. Mr Pearson explained County Lines to Members, the pattern for Kent was the same as the rest of the country, and the key element was knife crime, often including initiation which could be to harm an innocent person to gain credibility within the gang.

5. Referring to Cuckooing, which was where a gang took over the address of a vulnerable family or vulnerable adult, this process often resulted in young people being exposed to traumatic situations.
6. Excelsior Safeguarding had received funding from the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), Kent County Council (KCC) Members and District Councils to deliver resilience building training and support for young people in schools. This training had been and continued to be delivered in Swale, Thanet, Ashford, Maidstone and Folkestone & Hythe.
7. Mr Pearson has concerns about Drill music, that glorified violence and encouraged gangs to keep stab and kill tallies. He considered that this impacted young people who were particularly vulnerable such as those with ADHD and ASD.
8. Members discussed the use of video games and the percentages of children in years 5-6 that were regularly playing violent video games in the evening.
9. A member asked Mr Pearson what he would say to academics who pointed to childhood trauma as an indicator rather than music and video games as motivational factors. Mr Pearson agreed it was a multifaceted problem, he commented that young children playing violent video games could be considered to be tomorrows Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). He agreed that drill music was only one element of the problem but if it encouraged young people to stab, maim and kill then in time that would have an impact. Particularly on young children with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or Looked After Children (LAC) who were more vulnerable and potentially more controllable. Members discussed the link between poverty, deprivation, knife crime and criminal exploitation. Mr Pearson considered that this combination of factors, environmental factors, music, video games, and being in a deprived area resulted in a higher risk to gang exposure. Having said that Mr Pearson commented that gangs had been successful in recruiting both grammar school and private school pupils.
10. A Member commented on primary schools and evidence that giving information to pupils outside of their comfortable safe environment might be more effective. Mr Pearson explained that it was important to build resilience in children from 5 years upwards and a lot of learning had been taken from the US; Excelsior worked in close liaison with best practice program managers in the US.
11. The Chairman asked what more KCC could do, Mr Pearson commented that KCC was in a strong position as a commissioner. It was important to consider, when inviting bids to provide services, that there should be an element setting out what each group could do to complement each other to build a more effective integrated service.
12. Mr Pearson considered that a focus on early intervention was key, the Police were doing their best to tackle the effects, but it was challenging for them to address the root causes without joint support from others. The concentration

of joint services in deprived areas was very important in this respect. Smart early intervention and integration of services was critical.

13. The Chairman concluded the session by offering the Committees thanks to Mr Pearson for attending the Select Committee. The Chairman hoped that he had been able to cover everything he wanted to, but if there was any further information Mr Pearson wanted the Select Committee to consider he was welcome to forward it.

4. **James Whiddett (Operations Manager, Trading Standards, Kent County Council) and Oliver Jewell (Principal Trading Standards Officer, Kent County Council)**
(Item 4)