

VIOLENCE REDUCTION

Good Practice Case Studies

Westminster City Council
Integrated Gangs and
Exploitation Unit

Westminster's multi-disciplinary Integrated Gangs and Exploitation Unit (IGXU) regularly reaches out to a range of stakeholders in the voluntary and community sector, healthcare and educational settings and members of the public. Building sustainable relationships and confidence in the council's services is central to its aim of improving the lives of residents by reducing the incidence and impact of violent crime.



The Integrated Gangs and Exploitation Unit (IGXU) is a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary team made up of council and police officers. The roles within the unit consist of gang workers, a family therapist, analyst, enforcement officer, young person's advocate (females), an employment coach and a community engagement officer.

The unit aims to reduce gang violence to create safer communities and is built on the principles of early intervention, information sharing and personal responsibility. It gives young people the opportunity to exit the "gang" lifestyle through a series of services and interventions. The integrated partnership approach brings respite to the community from such behaviour which affects their quality of life in the most disruptive way.

Those identified as being involved with gangs and the associated criminality, whether through police/community intelligence or through self-referral, are given intensive assistance to turn their lives around. However, should they fail to grasp these opportunities, and continue to engage in anti-social behaviour that impacts on the community, the IGXU will undertake a range of enforcement options to curtail this behaviour. Gang members, including those on the fringes, are given every opportunity to engage with the service and enforcement is seen as a last resort.

Partners involved

City of Westminster

A wide range of
Westminster based
community groups



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Prior to lockdown

The community engagement officers in the IGXU and Prevent team regularly map and reach out to a range of stakeholders in the voluntary and community sector, healthcare and educational settings, faith and religious institutions and members of the public. The engagement aims to raise awareness, discuss concerns and build capacity around prevention of issues related to crime, exploitation and serious youth violence, as well as have detailed conversations and dialogue on the causes and concerns related to wider determinants of health. The aim is to sustain relationships and build trust and confidence in the council's services and partnerships and to improve the lives of residents by responding to the insights and tailoring our work practices and approach.

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The Challenge

During lockdown

Core work has been impacted since gatherings, groups and events are not permitted. Normal engagement work has become more reactive, rather than proactive. Communities themselves are adapting to new ways of keeping their routine and seeking support, which is overwhelming for them already. There is a common understanding that conversations and discussions around serious youth violence, gangs and Prevent might induce additional anxiety in residents, especially at uncertain times like this. Therefore, the officers have adapted and have been able to expand the scope of their engagement roles, which go beyond just talking to members of the public about different topics. Along with future planning and delivery of the core work, they are now also focussed on building a culture of community engagement in the wider council, ensuring that the insight, intelligence and expertise on different issues and concerns are linked, and responded to appropriately.

They are doing this by:

1. Providing consultations around gaps, barriers and effective engagement to different support services and departments within the council to influence their delivery which suits the community's needs and preferences; (for example, around domestic violence and abuse, local SEND offer and City Surveys)
2. Working jointly with Public Health, Policy Performance & Communication and Campaigns Research & Insight Teams to provide consistent and appropriate COVID-19 messaging, guidance, training and support to Westminster communities (including NHS Test & Trace);
3. Exploring joint working and potential partnerships with internal WCC departments and developing engagement workstreams, in line



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with the WCC enablement and renewal strategy; (Central Community Engagement Network/ Hub);

4. Development and implementation of Westminster Council's Community Engagement Strategy Community Safety.

Work carried out

During "lockdown 1", the core community engagement work around Serious Youth Violence has been impacted, and has become more reactive, especially since gatherings, groups and events are not permitted, and communities are not equipped or inclined to use virtual platforms to have difficult conversations around issues related to youth violence, gangs and exploitation.

Therefore, in addition to future planning and delivery of business as usual, the role of the community engagement officer has mostly been focussed on supporting the Public Health colleagues and other departments in the council with the Covid-19 Outbreak Control Plan, as well as being creative in expanding the scope of her engagement role by building a culture of community engagement in the wider council operations.

Some of the key highlights include:

- NHS Test & Trace outreach sessions with Westminster Housing Representatives, Youth Clubs, BME Health Forum and Westminster Community Network.
- Produced a parenting handout for "How to talk to your children about violent incidents".
- Joint work and partnerships with Faiths Forum for London, Westminster Mind and London Safeguarding Children Partnership for joint delivery of mutual outcomes around Community Safety.

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Snapshot of community engagement (includes initiatives carried out prior to Lockdowns)

1. Kurdish Women Event

The Community Engagement team from Community Safety partnered with local community organisations to organise a lunch-based discussion with the local Iraqi-Kurdish women living in north east Westminster. This was planned in response to concerns around young people from Kurdish background being related to crime and exploitation and their overrepresentation in council services. The aim was to understand how the historical displacement has affected their life in the UK, their sense of integration or isolation, their family dynamics and parenting, along with their level of awareness of local support, barriers to engagement, social capital and their needs and preference of services. The findings and recommendations which could make the services more culturally adaptable and better support their sense of wellbeing, integration and family life are recorded in a report and shared with relevant partners.

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2. Keeping Young People Safe & Healthy: Parents & Carers gathering at Church Street Library

A regular dialogue with the community in Church Street provided us with an indication of the intensity of the impact that crime and exploitation have on them and their sense of safety and wellbeing. However, there still is a gap in their awareness of the widespread support and activities in their local area, council-based offers, and how these services link up with the wider determinants of health, welfare and physical spaces. We used this knowledge and opportunity to organise an event at a library in the north east of the borough for the parents who would wish to learn more about what's on offer for their children and families, with different themes, such as- safety in the neighbourhood, support for families, health and wellbeing, future opportunities and local spaces & activities. The event was also a platform for the local services to engage better with the parents to understand the barriers, address those concerns and strengthen the social capital. Recommendations, suggestions and concerns were collated in an insight report which reflected upon the needs and gaps of health inequalities in the area, and shared with over 25 different partners, along with a detailed action plan to act on those issues.



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3. RAGE (Raising Awareness of Gangs and Exploitation) Training for Frontline Professionals

There is a widespread lack of understanding in the community about the concepts related to violence, gangs, exploitation and young people, which can subsequently feed into how one distinguishes and acts towards the most vulnerable. This can be counterproductive, and therefore there is a strong need to emphasise vulnerability rather than criminality and raise awareness and challenge these unhelpful perceptions with accurate information, resources and support. The IGXU community engagement officer and females' advocate worker are delivering RAGE (Raising Awareness on Gangs & Exploitation) training to equip frontline professionals, responsible workforce or volunteers in the community with baseline knowledge of the principles surrounding gangs and exploitation. This will empower them to utilise tools and resources to identify early, intervene sensitively and signpost effectively to support the vulnerable young people and their families into keeping safer and healthy.

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4. Fathers For Future parenting course

The programme of workshops is delivered by Future Men, which is targeted at fathers from vulnerable communities in Westminster by empowering them to address concerns around extremism and radicalisation. The workshops also explore and consider broader local social and safeguarding concerns that have been raised by fathers and through extensive engagement by the Prevent Team and Future Men. This initiative is funded by Prevent, after a need around parenting classes specifically for fathers was identified and came out as a strong recommendation through our engagement work on several occasions.

5. Community Workshops

The gangs worker has facilitated and participated in several Community Zoom meetings to address current issues and challenges faced by youth. Panel members included the police, youth workers, doctors, family therapist, religious clergy and schoolteachers. Topics of discussion included: Gangs and exploitation, serious youth violence, Black Lives Matter (Sudan Knowledge June 2020), "Pitfalls of Society Protecting our Youth" (November 2020) and Serious Youth Violence & Role of Community. The meetings were organised



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to raise awareness of youth violence and aimed at parents, adults and young people. The meetings were presented in both English and Arabic.

6. Critical Incident

After the fatal stabbing of two youths of Sudanese heritage during the summer of 2020 there was a lot of concern from the Sudanese community in Westminster and the adjoining boroughs of Brent and Kensington & Chelsea. The two fatal stabbings left many people in shock, confused and in a state of panic. Many parents were wondering if their son or daughter would be the next victim. A flexible gangs worker from the IGXU supported both families in the aftermath of the incidents by visiting, making regular contact and offering other forms of service-based support if needed.

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7. Community Safety- Community Engagement Strategy

The Community Engagement Strategy (CES) highlights the key priority of capturing the voices of our communities to understand what matters most to them to keep themselves and Westminster safe. The purpose of the CES is to provide a framework of methods and approaches to effectively engage with the communities to remain informed by them in making decisions around community safety which affect them directly.

Although this strategy is a projection of agreeable outcomes for three years, it will be open and flexible to the changes that might occur due to local, national or international events, including Covid-19 pandemic. Building relationships, trust, commitment and capacity across communities and statutory organisations are likely to be a gradual process. This will be reflected in the action plans that sit beneath this strategy.

The goal of implementing the strategy is to maximise community involvement in planning, designing, developing, delivering and evaluating local initiatives to achieve:

- Improved participation and involvement
- Strengthened trust and confidence
- Enhanced services and outcomes
- Community resilience and preparedness



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Conclusion

The vision of Westminster Council is to improve the community engagement culture and enhance the engagement responses widely, starting with co-ordinating efforts, extracting best practice and building capacity. It is also worth identifying that how Covid-19 has highlighted the inequitable distribution of wealth, income and opportunities in Westminster communities, and the differential impact of the pandemic on different ethnicities and socio-economic status will be a spur to both thought and deed. These divisions have also been featured in the type and frequency of messaging and engagement we have been doing around Covid-19.

There are likely to be levels of unemployment and other racial and disproportionate impact, possibly increasing the vulnerabilities of our targeted communities even more. At the same time, people will be less able, and so less inclined, to participate in collective preventative work, when their basic health, safety and material needs are not met, or means for meeting them are still insecure.

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This is one of a series of case studies submitted by London boroughs and collated by London Councils to share experience and learning across the capital. Publication date: May 2021



City of Westminster

