

18 Darkness At The Edge Of Town: Merton's Teenage Gangs Initiative

The Gangs initiative emerged following a noticeable rise in the number of street robberies over the Christmas and New Year period of 2005/06. Demand for a response came both from residents and members of the public reporting a significant rise in fear of crime, as well as from local statutory bodies such as the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and the Local Authority (LA) as evidence pointed towards the majority of the robberies involving young people (school-aged) as both victims and perpetrators.

Research carried out by MPS analysts, with assistance from local schools and the LA, revealed that the increase in robberies was symptomatic of an underlying problem: the presence of several teenage gangs, both local and from neighbouring boroughs. Moreover, the presence of gangs was manifesting itself through increased carrying of offensive weapons in schools and rising levels of youth-related crimes.

As a result, the gangs' initiative was initiated in March 2006 through the local multi-agency Joint Tasking Group (JTG) with the aim of developing partnership working to problem-solve the increase in gang-related crime and disorder.

The dynamics of young people forming gangs presented a wide variety of underlying causes that could only realistically be addressed through a multi-agency partnership involving statutory, community and voluntary sector organisations working together. As a result, two strands of interconnected work were identified: Enforcement and Diversion/Prevention. The stakeholders involved in delivering each of the strands are coordinated through the JTG to maximise research, analysis, information-sharing, knowledge, effective-practice and ensure complementarity between all the areas of work.

The JTG quickly established that several barriers existed to addressing gang problems-difficulties in defining gang problems, forming successful partnerships and determining impact. This made the establishment of the project's objectives the first major hurdle. The JTG opted for establishing four Key Performance Indicators that best reflected the strands of work identified. The aim was to achieve the four KPI's.

Moreover, as the JTG discusses the issue of gangs on a monthly basis, evaluating progress via analysis of the KPI's, it allocates resources to targeted initiatives and serves as a forum wherein partners are able to call upon a broad-range of views and expertise in order to discuss bottlenecks and problems. More comprehensive 6-month evaluations on the KPI's and the partnership's work were carried out in November 2006 and April 2007 and serve to stipulate the strategic direction for the future.