

WALTHAM FOREST RESEARCH REPORT: CO-PRODUCTION IN ADDRESSING CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

A British Academy Funded Project



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Summary

Waltham Forest has high levels of relative deprivation, with neighbourhoods housing communities of high aspiration but blocked opportunity, which is consequential for gang-related crime. Racialised communities are disproportionately represented as both victims and perpetrators of serious violence. Embedded gangs remain active in the drug business and have endured several generations of disruption activity. Newer gangs involved in drug distribution and serious crime have evolved rapidly from neighbourhood peer groups.

After a brief period of a more localised focus during the Covid-19 pandemic, the County Line drug distribution model continues transporting drugs to 'out of town' locations. County Lines organisers continue to use coercion, intimidation and violence (including sexual violence) to control the workforce, and increasingly gangs groom and control vulnerable people utilising online technology.

Dominant gangs are said to operate a near monopoly in drug supply in Waltham Forest. The County Lines workforce is becoming younger, decreasing from an average age of 14-15 years to 12-13 years, with some as young as ten. More recent supply and demand for Vapes, Xanax, Nitrous Oxide, Cannabis Gummies and Lean for and by younger people is emergent in the Borough. The price and purity of Class A drugs remain relatively unchanged, indicating a stable supply.

Young women continue to be used in gang activities and are at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation. Fewer support interventions are reported for young women and girls.

More established gangs who operate the drug business are relatively unaffected by the imprisonment of gang elders. Succession and logistics are planned and communicated in and from the prison estate (see accompanying HMPPS report). A newer franchised distribution model of drug supply is beginning to emerge. Gang involvement in Darkweb procurement of drugs and use of crypto-currencies is a concern.

There is evidence of diversification of gang criminal business in Waltham Forest, including extortion and money laundering. Embedded gangs are linked to Serious Organised Crime Groups and sometimes shade into the role of middle-market drug brokers.

Waltham Forest has a highly skilled workforce based in statutory and voluntary sectors; individuals are committed to reducing gang-related harms and safeguarding vulnerable and young people. Many of the challenges encountered by practitioners relate to deficits in resources. However, some established working methods need to be more suitable to address group-influenced risks and harms occurring in communities.

The police sometimes struggle to maintain legitimacy with some communities but are considered valuable partners by other professionals in the Borough of Waltham Forest. However, intelligence cycles and regional capacity to assist specialist operations require improvement.

School and college exclusions continue to hinder inclusive preventative strategies for early help strategies. Retention of permanent social work staff was a particular problem. The lack of a specialist adolescent team needs redress. The voluntary sector provides a significant resource for outreach and detached work. However, policymakers only sometimes included voluntary sector partners when planning strategies or giving sustainable contracts for longer-term work.

Waltham Forest is developing more localised services, and Youth Hubs will be part of this strategy. Youth Hubs could provide safe spaces for young people and co-locate dedicated multi-agency gang desistance teams seconded by different agencies to provide universal and targeted youth and community services. These services would be part of a strategic response characterised by suppression, social intervention, organisational development and the provision of social opportunities outlined in the following report.

The Findings in brief: a SWOT Summary

A SWOT analysis is a method used to evaluate an organizations performance and procedures. These aspects are strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, hence the acronym SWOT. A SWOT analysis reveals elements that are performing well, those that are underperforming and opportunities to improve functioning

Strengths:

- The involvement of Councillors at a community level.
- The regular assessment and refreshing of partnership board objectives and subgroups.
- The commitment by agencies to multi-agency practice and information exchange.
- A creative and committed voluntary sector.
- Experienced and skilled practitioners.
- The involvement of culturally significant local organisations like Leyton Orient F.C. and Chances. The involvement of individuals with extensive local knowledge willing to go the extra mile.
- The innovative involvement of Young People.
- The recognition of diversity and its representation in local governance.
- A wide range of services involved in the issues.

Weaknesses

- The lack of a comprehensive Gangs Strategy and a dedicated multi-agency gangs team.
- The absence of links with Organised Crime and Drug strategies
- The capacity for scrutiny by Councillors.
- Limited analytic capacity both locally and regionally.
- The focus on a multiplicity of activities is too broad and centralised.
- Interventions tending to focus on individuals rather than being place-based
- Inconsistent communication between sub-groups.
- Unhelpful and unintended overlap between sub-group functions.
- The absence of partners and voluntary sector groups central to a 'joined-up' response (e.g. Probation and Housing).
- Short term commissioning of voluntary sector groups.
- Lack of professional Detached Youth Work provision.
- Lack of business engagement.
- Patchy follow-up to community meetings.
- High levels of school and college exclusions.
- Insufficient Exploitation education in schools.
- Variable quality of housing and social care placements for children and young people.
- No specialist enforcement interventions.
- Variable application of 'Missing' procedures.
- NRM waiting times.

Opportunities

- New Housing Initiatives.
- New Employment and Training opportunities.
- New Community Safety leadership.
- New Strategies and refreshing partnership arrangements.
- New 'Combatting Drugs' partnership.
- Localised Youth Hub development.
- Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) resources.

Threats

- Cost of Living Crisis and cuts.
- Growing embeddedness and extralegal governance exerted by some gangs.
- The emergence of new gangs.
- Waning confidence in some public services.
- Insufficient strategic join-up across services may undermine impact of interventions.
- Unnecessary duplication of work.
- Failure to identify gang affected/involved children at an early stage.
- Lack of uniformity of return home interviews and follow-up.
- Normalisation of violence and gang life in some neighbourhoods.
- On-line grooming and illicit markets.
- Disconnects with voluntary and community sectors.

Recommendations

Recommendations are summarised here and are ordered for convenience from strategic to practice levels of intervention. Recommendations emerge thematically in the report and are highlighted in bold in the relevant sections.

1. A comprehensive Gangs Strategy could usefully be developed with reference to the planning tools and evidence provided in this report.
2. A multi-agency Gangs Intervention Team should be developed as part of the Gangs Strategy and their work should be delivered locally through proposed Youth Hubs.
3. A targeted and scaled approach to interventions should be taken by co-located multi-agency teams. Regular reviews of targeted locality-based work located in Youth Hubs should be undertaken by all stakeholders and by Councillors at Scrutiny Committees.
4. Themed multi-agency audits of contextual safeguarding and exploitation of young women and girls should be undertaken regularly.
5. Specific programs of intervention should be designed by statutory and voluntary sector providers to focus on the traumatising effects of historic and contemporaneous racism and its relation to criminal involvement.
6. A Combatting Drugs Partnership should be established and should pursue the remits of the Government's 10 Year Action Plan and Serious Organised Crime Strategies.
7. The absence of crime analysts both locally and regionally should be addressed.
8. Co-learning between practitioners, policymakers and analysts should be facilitated to ensure systematic recording and analytical capability is continuously applied.
9. Scrutiny training for Councillors in issues pertaining to drugs and community safety should be implemented by the SafetyNet Board.
10. Legitimacy and confidence in the criminal justice system should be improved by monitoring and addressing disproportionate involvement of members of racialised communities in the criminal justice system.
11. Waltham Forest Borough Command Unit (BCU) should review the current discrepancies in sanction detection rates for Violence with Injury.
12. On-line engagement and intervention should be utilised to prevent and pursue grooming and drug markets in digital spaces.
13. Internet Safety concerning Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)should be taught as part of Physical Social Health Education in all Waltham Forest Schools.
14. The supply and demand for Vapes, Xanax, Nitrous Oxide, Cannabis Gummies and Lean for and by younger people is an issue requiring further attention from the relevant partnerships in Waltham Forest, not at least because of their association with the increased exploitation of vulnerable young people through dependency and debt.

15. Mechanisms to ensure pupils have access to, and are supported in, mainstream education services should be devised. This would involve the training of school Governors in CCE, independent advocacy at exclusion panels, reintegration plans for children and young people in alternative provision, and a memorandum of understanding regarding admissions to local colleges.
16. IT development to facilitate better information sharing across Mosaic and Child View with graded levels of access.
17. Further development of inter-agency work with the voluntary sector as part of a co-ordinated approach to the harm caused by gangs.
18. Accurate flagging on systems of gang-involved or gang-associated young people that reflect the contextual realities of young and vulnerable people.
19. Incentives for specialist staff seconded to a multi-agency gangs team.
20. A further review of the services or teams which have the skill-sets and capacity to undertake particular pieces of work to mitigate risk should take place. Adolescent services (both statutory and voluntary) should be deployed in co-located multi-agency teams.
21. Incentives for social work staff to encourage staff retention.
22. Training as part of certified Continuous Professional Development, for front line staff in CCE, Contextual Safeguarding and local organised crime.
23. Increased referral and provision for young women and girls at risk of, or experiencing, sexual exploitation.
24. The tenets of a gang desistance model be built into the development of the proposed Youth Hub(s) and delivered locally by co-located Gangs Intervention Team(s).

Introduction and Background

Criminal Exploitation and Modern Slavery Associated with Gangs, Drug Networks and County Lines.

This report presents the findings of research conducted in Waltham Forest, funded by the British Academy (Innovation Fund). The study aims to co-produce knowledge by exploring stakeholder understanding and partnership responses to criminal exploitation arising from drug dealing networks involved with County Lines. The National Crime Agency (NCA) defines County Lines as:

A criminal business model which involves the 'transportation of illegal drugs, by gangs and organised criminal networks, from one area to another within the UK, using dedicated mobile telephone lines (NCA, 2018: 1).

County Lines are operated by criminal networks, based mainly in cities, that transport Class A drugs to 'out of town' locations. The organisers use dedicated mobile phone lines to take orders from buyers and children, and vulnerable adults to transport, store and deliver the drugs. County Lines organisers may use coercion, intimidation and violence (including sexual violence) to control this workforce. In other cases people are drawn in to this life by the promise of "easy money" by peers. Initially, the 'Youngers', the children and vulnerable involved, may be given money, phones or expensive clothing but are then told they must repay this by working for the County Lines gang. Sometimes the 'Elders', the organisers, arrange for them to be robbed of the drugs they carry so that they become indebted. If they protest, they may be told to keep working to pay off the debt or they, and their families, will be subject to violent retribution. The 'Youngers', who deliver the drugs, risk being apprehended by the police, assaulted and robbed by their customers or by members of rival gangs (Windle & Briggs, 2015; Andell and Pitts, 2018; Whittaker et al 2018; Glover and Finlay, 2019; Moyle, 2019; NCA, 2018; Harding, 2020; Spicer 2020; Lydon & Emanuel 2022).

It is reported that those involved at the lower end of the drug supply chain are usually young males. They also include other vulnerable adults and young women, acting as 'runners' to transport drugs, cash, and weapons (NCA, 2018).

In the first decade of the 21st century, most illicit drug markets run by street gangs were concentrated in, or adjacent to, gang-affected neighbourhoods or nearby transport hubs (Pitts, 2008; Andell & Pitts, 2012; Harding, 2014; Densley, 2014; Whittaker & Harvard, 2018). However, from around 2007 local drug markets were becoming 'saturated' (Windle and Briggs, 2015) leading to an intensification of violence between rival gangs as they fought for 'market share', with a concomitant rise in homicides, serious injury, arrests and incarceration (Pitts, 2008; Windle and Briggs, 2015; Pitts, 2016; Whittaker & Harvard, 2018; Andell and Pitts, 2018; Andell, 2019). Recent policy developments in combatting this national problem have included the instigation of the National County Lines Co-ordination Centre (NCLCC) in 2018 to co-ordinate enforcement activity through improved information and intelligence sharing, strategic assessments, planning and support through Regional Organised Crime Units or central services (NCLCC, 2021). Simon Harding (2022) writes:

In its 2018 report, the NCA (2019), identified over 2,000 individual deal lines, mostly supplying heroin and crack cocaine. 91% of individuals involved were male; the age of involvement was decreasing; forms of control were increasingly inventive, e.g. kidnap and sexual violence; and exploitation of vulnerable young people remained central to the business model. Reports indicate London was the leading County Line exporter of road/rail distribution (Blakeburn & Smith, 2020). Despite highlighting continuing intelligence gaps, the NCA and regional

constabularies developed policing strategies involving covert surveillance, evidence-led policing, test purchasing, ANPR, and the use of cell-cite data, which met with some success in targeting and reducing the volume of active County Lines, (Dodd, 2021; Jaensch & South, 2018).

In November 2022 there are at least 3495 live Modern Slavery police investigations being undertaken in the UK. 2109 (60%) of these investigations involved criminal exploitation (county lines/cannabis cultivation/fraud/theft (National Insight team 2022).

This report examines the development and evolution of gangs in Waltham Forest that exploit young and vulnerable people and how professionals, communities, young people and partnerships might respond to the threats. This study has adopted an action research approach to understand better the issues involved and to formulate effective policy recommendations to reduce harm from this type of criminal exploitation. This report includes the views of young people affected by gangs, practitioners, and policymakers in order to co-produce recommendation for more effective responses. In order to contextualise the data collected, it is helpful to understand how it was collected and analysed.

Methodology

Whittaker and Densley (2020) suggest that processes of gang evolution are difficult to capture in research because gang studies often focus on individual gang members rather than gangs. Fortunately, two previous studies of gangs in Waltham Forest have been conducted (Pitts 2008 and Harvard and Whittaker in 2018), and these have enabled gang development in the Borough to be analysed. This third study of Waltham Forest gangs does not provide methodologically matched cross-sectional data over time (as was the case for the first two studies); however, methodologically, the similarities in collecting qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups provide an opportunity for broad comparison over time.

The research proposal was peer-reviewed by subject experts on behalf of the British Academy and the University of Suffolk provided ethical approval. Data collected was anonymised in accordance with the guidance of the British Society of Criminology. The project team underwent the relevant checks expected for work in the safeguarding and crime fields. A focused literature review regarding gangs, County Lines and drug dealing networks was produced, and then a rapid assessment of available data was undertaken. Requests for data came during leadership change within the Community Safety Team in Waltham Forest. Therefore statistical data on crime was mainly collected from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), although the Youth Offending Team also supplied some additional data. MOPAC data disaggregates crime at a borough level rather than ward or Lower Layer Super Output Areas. Given the changes in the modus operandi of gangs reported by Whittaker et al. (2018), this was not considered detrimental to the aims or findings of the project. Access to the Waltham Forest gangs database which estimates the numbers and levels risk of gang affiliates, was not made available; but other data sources were found primarily through internet searches. During the time that this research was being conducted, community safety strategies for Waltham Forest were being refreshed, and the project has therefore had an opportunity to share initial findings and thoughts to some stakeholders and the Director of Community Safety.

The research gathered data from 49 participants. They included, young people, Councillors, policy officers and practitioners from the community, statutory and voluntary sectors. Eight respondents held regional and national roles and 22 were directly involved with child criminal and sexual exploitation in the Borough. A focus group involving eight young people was organised by the Young Independent Advisory Group (YIAG)

and 11 brief semi-structured interviews were conducted by the Street Base programme. This data was coded using Atlas software and then re-coded to examine experiential, inferential and dispositional themes. Conflicting accounts from participants were re-examined for evidence consistent with or disconfirming these themes (Booth et al., 2013).

As Densley (2023) argues:

The lesson here for UK gang scholars is not to accept the media or practitioner narrative around county lines at face value, but to continue to ask the types of critical questions that will generate deeper understanding.

Given the potential vulnerabilities of young people who participated in the research, it is essential to reiterate the ethical and practical considerations given. The Youth Independent Advisory Group (YIAG) and Street Base programs conducted the focus group and outreach interviews. Both organisations are young person led and are experienced in undertaking research and consultations regarding community safety and health issues in the Borough. The principal researcher built rapport with the young people conducting the research and focus group participants over a number of months to establish trust and confidence and clarify the research ethics and boundaries. Statutory and voluntary sector coordinators supported Young people before, during, and after the process. The participants ranged in age from 14 to 22 years, with a median age of 16. The focus group participants were slightly older, ranging from 15-23 with a median age of 18. The self-described gender and ethnic/racial backgrounds of participants in outreach interviews included; 5 females and 6 males; 4 White, 4 Asian British, 2 Black African Caribbean and 1 mixed ethnic heritage participant. The focus group participants described themselves as 4 females and 4 males: 1 Afro-Hispanic, 3 Black, 1 Turkic, 1 Asian, and 2 mixed ethnic heritage participants.

The project also observed and participated in several professional multi-agency, young people's and community meetings, which focused on safeguarding, criminal exploitation and neighbourhood safety. The role of the researcher was transparent for these meetings, and relevant consent was obtained for attendance.

Individual Agency and Age in Gangs, County Lines and Modern Slavery

In order to account for levels of exploitation, practitioners make complex assessments, often considering the choices made and the circumstances in which they are made, sometimes known as agency. Agency is a contested term, meaning more than an intention. Lindegaard and Jacques (2013) argue human intention or agency is often omitted in criminological research studies, which sometimes over-rely on socio-economic factors to explain crime problems. They define intentional choice as a conscious and directional decision and suggest that some people choose to offend to transform their lives; when this happens, they argue, human agency should be foregrounded as a cause of crime. It is therefore essential to provide some initial explanations of 'bounded intentionality' or 'human agency' at the outset as many participants in the current study raised the question of "free will" when reflecting on the culpability or vulnerability of young people associated with County lines. One respondent, for example, spoke of family context, belonging and status:

I don't even think its always necessarily about poverty. There are so many people that I know from a family of four that are drug dealing...its mainly people you're around, (WFFG1)

Another respondent said:

They're actually well brought up, and it surprises you. You know that individual who's been into sport from a young age doing bad stuff, and it makes you question, moral wise, yeah. Really trying to drug deal when he's got enough money in his pockets.(Pol 3).

Other respondents spoke of how status, consumerism and the need for instant gratification play a part. One said:

So I think there's a lot of that instant gratification for adolescents and getting things quite quickly and there's availability to do that. I think there's a lot of pressure that this is what everyone is already doing anyway, (ERP L2).

The gang literature has often cited relative deprivation, as a driver of gang involvement(see [for example] Andell 2019; Pitts 2013). Moreover, exploited subjects are often reluctant to accept that they are being exploited because their exploiter may be a sibling or family friend. Evidence was submitted to the Home Affairs Select Committee on Human Trafficking to clarify expectations placed upon professionals through more specific professional and legal guidelines relating to young people and criminal exploitation. Guidance for child criminal exploitation in Modern Slavery was recently issued in May 2023 by Government (Home Office 2023), which states:

In cases involving children, criminal activity may appear not to have been forced. However, decision-makers should bear in mind that children cannot give informed consent to engage in criminal or other exploitative activity, and they cannot give consent to be abused or trafficked. ...Cases may be complex, and the competent authorities must consider cases based on the specific facts of an individual case.

Distinguishing between what we might call the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' participants in County Lines remains what Rittel & Webber (1973) describe as a "Wicked Problem" and in recent times, we have witnessed shifts away from foregrounding vulnerable and young people as perpetrators towards recognising victimhood. To a degree, this process is assisted by the utilisation of Modern Slavery legislation and the use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), an issue discussed later in the report.

Responses to questions about the divisions between victims and perpetrators were split. Either people involved in County Lines were thought of as exploiters or exploited. Some respondents used a rough age guide, usually under 18, to divide wrongdoers from victims. These dilemmas lead to difficulties for welfare, professionals and the police in deciding how to respond. Difficulties are particularly acute in cases of older young people, around the age of 18, who are discussed further in the report. His Majesties Inspectorate of Fire and Rescue Services (HMIFRS, 2022) reports that:

When vulnerable people reach 18, the support available to them drops. Interviewees described a "cliff edge" leading to a "lost generation".

A respondent in Waltham Forest said:

I have observed that there is a point when children go from being vulnerable in the minds of some professionals to being deliberately criminal and it usually happens at age 17 and a half... (ERP WF7).

However, vulnerability to involvement in crime is not simply about an individual's proclivities. Much of the gang literature in the UK and North America suggests that neighbourhood is a crucial factor in gang involvement.

Contextual Demographics: Relative Deprivation, Neighbourhood and Covid-19.

London is one of the most unequal cities in Europe and is described by Tammaru et al (2015), as being “strongly segregated” compared to other European cities. According to borough statistics (LBWF 2022), Waltham Forest now ranks as the 12th most deprived Borough in London and is home to both affluent households and residents who struggle to make ends meet. Waltham Forest residents have a median household income of £35,000, with those in the north of the Borough earning more than those in the south. Leyton residents have the lowest median household income of £27,790, whilst Endlebury has a relatively higher income of £43,210, a significant difference of £15,420. The impact of relative deprivation found both between and within some neighbourhoods is not incidental to the study of crime but is an essential factor in tracing the causal tendencies towards crime. Those who are relatively deprived are more likely to suffer structural and emotional strains making them more susceptible to deviant behaviours and are more likely to suffer disproportionate victimisation (Lea & Young, 1984; Brown, 2001; Webber, 2022).

In a Home Office study examining the involvement in drug markets Disley & Liddle (2016) they found that locality was perceived as a defining features of gang involvement. Self-reported violence rates were more than double for those living in the 20% most deprived areas as compared with those living in the 20% least deprived areas, with stranger violence being more prevalent by a factor of 10 in the more deprived areas for adults aged 18 and over. A recent report from MOPAC (2022) found that deprivation metrics were predictors of the most serious youth violence. In 2020/21, 43% of children in Waltham Forest lived in households with an income of less than 60% of the UK median, worse than the London median (The Trust for London, 2022).

The impact of relative deprivation and poverty in Waltham Forest on County lines grooming was highlighted by a respondent who cited the rationale of some young people involved in drug dealing:

...they're offering me an opportunity to help my birth family, my mum's on her own with so many kids, we live in temporary accommodation, we need this and I'm able to provide some money for my family...if you've got a son who's the oldest with younger siblings, so that's what's been exploited, vulnerability, (ERP WF9).

A House of Commons research briefing on social housing (2022) highlights the imperative to deliver housing that is genuinely affordable to improve living standards and address poverty levels. Affordable good quality housing continues to present challenges in Waltham Forest. Official figures from the ONS show the average UK house prices rose from £167,716 in January 2013 to £290,000 at the end of January 2023, an increase of 73 per cent making the provision of social housing and the costs of private renting much more challenging, particularly for people on low incomes. The Commons Briefing recognises some of these challenges and explains that the fall in the number of homes for Social Rent is also due to factors including Right to Buy sales, conversions from social rent to Affordable Rent, and low levels of new supply of homes for social rent. The focus on delivering new Affordable Rent and affordable home ownership has meant the supply of new homes for social rent has declined. Almeida (2021) reports that by 2016, the proportion of Waltham Forest residents living in local authority or housing association properties had decreased to 16.7 per cent, well below the borough-wide average across London of 22.9 per cent. The local authority housing stock decreased from 16,302 units in 1994 to 9,653 in 2020, representing a 40.8 per cent decrease in the number of council homes in a 26-year period. This reduced provision has led to a subsequent increase in the private rented sector with relatively reduced regulation. The private rented sector is not as amenable to partnership work to promote community safety. One respondent told us:

There's a business owner and on top of his business he has multiple flats, but he doesn't like talking to the police 'cos the last thing he wants is an execution of a drugs warrant on his own property where drug dealing's taking place 'cos it will reflect badly on him (POL 1).

Despite challenges to providing affordable public housing, Waltham Forrest Council has committed to building more than 500 council homes for rent over the next few years. And to deliver 2,000 new council homes over the next five years by redeveloping council-owned sites. National policymakers have foregrounded the housing issue after the Covid-19 pandemic. The Housing Communities and Local Government Select Committee (July 2020) noted:

A social housebuilding programme should be top of the Government's agenda to rebuild the country from the impact of COVID-19.

Locally, the economic impacts on income from Covid 19 have been palpable. Before Covid19, Waltham Forest had relatively low levels of Universal Credit claimants, just slightly above the London average. Since lockdown began, claimants have steadily risen by 9.8% (18,195 persons), which is 1.8% higher than the London average of 8%, (480,945 persons). A recent study analysed correlations between increased numbers of Universal Credit claimants and increases in general, property, and violent crime. The research suggests this could be attributed to an increased pool of motivated offenders due to the social strains of financial hardship (Tiratelli et al, 2023).

Bond et al. (2012) argue that for people living in deprived areas, the quality and aesthetics of housing and neighbourhoods is associated with mental well-being, but so too are feelings of respect, status and progress that may be derived from how places are created, serviced and talked about by those who live there. They argue that neighbourhoods can be environments that promote a person's positive or negative experience or view of themselves concerning others. For example, in terms of trust, control, self-esteem and status, which in turn affects how they act.

Previous studies of gangs in Waltham Forest also recognised the significance of the neighbourhood and how this impacts young people in the formation and association with gangs (Pitts, 2008; Harvard & Whittaker, 2018). A respondent in this study, when asked about the factors that draw young people into gang life, explained:

I think the main one is just the background cos they don't have much. Then the people in the same environment look like they are doing great. Easy option. Then sometimes if they are living on this estate, the park is in the middle of this estate, where you have 15 year olds up to no good...he would be like aged 5, 6, or 7 then, as they've all grown up in the same place they integrate... So (they ask) do this for me, and then your in this kind of life...as well as for the money, image, status and power for a 15 year old kid...(WF L3).

Another said:

...we know for some of our young people the gang activities that they're involved in provides the food for them, provides the rent for their parents and so there's a lot of reasons why they wouldn't want to necessarily or feel able to change their behaviors on top of the fear and threats that they suffer as well, (ERP 15).

According to the Office for National Statistics (2020) “ethnic minorities” are more likely to live in rented social housing in London. A respondent drew attention to the over-representation of Black and minoritised young men in certain neighbourhoods who get caught up in criminal exploitation. He said:

I think a lot of who we see are from a similar demographic which is young Black males, so we deal with it...Much depends on the Borough. (WF L3).

Pitts (2008) argues that Black and minoritised young people from neighbourhoods that suffer from relative deprivation face limited choices. In such environments, legitimate opportunities are presented as open for some but attenuated for others. Therefore, as mentioned above, the illicit acquisition of money, image, status and power is a bid for “respect” in situations where day-to-day experiences often deny them that respect.

Racialised Communities and Neighbourhood

Waltham Forest is one of the most ethnically diverse areas of London. 146,880 (53%) persons are from a BAME background (other than White British/Irish), compared to 58% in London. In 2020, 61 per cent of new migrants were from Europe compared to 53 per cent a decade ago, while 18 per cent were from Asia, 9 per cent from non-EU countries, and the remaining 18 per cent from the Rest of the World. Along with some population shifts, in the past two decades East London has witnessed intensive residential development in and around the site of the 2012 Olympic Games and the development of the Westfield shopping centre and this has been accompanied by ‘gentrification’, mainly in Walthamstow, which has pushed up house prices.

However these developments have, from 2010, been accompanied by a governmental economic policy of Austerity which has caused significant reductions in public spending at the local level. Havard and Whittaker (2018) report a reduction of 67% in the central government grant funding to Waltham Forest:

The wider economic and social climate influenced this increasing financial focus. As noted above, Waltham Forest has seen a reduction in government funding to the public sector linked at least in part to the austerity response to the global financial crisis 2008. In the face of the retreat of public services daily, young people may find that street gangs offer economical and psychological security to young people who face increasing disadvantages.

Respondents tended to think that the recent and rapid gentrification in Waltham Forest were a “mixed blessing”, which sometimes impacted negatively on working class and non-White communities in Waltham Forest. As a Runnymede Trust report (Almeida, 2021) suggests:

Racialised communities often feel that when their neighbourhood is gentrifying, it no longer has a place for them. The traditional community spaces, shops, cafes and pubs are replaced by new, expensive and, at times, utterly unaffordable and incomprehensible alternatives.

They go on to say that most of the gentrification has happened in:

Walthamstow Central, Walthamstow Village, areas surrounding Lloyd Park and the William Morris Gallery, Blackhorse Road, Lea Bridge, an area near the Wanstead Flats, and clusters of areas near Leyton, Leyton High Road and Leytonstone stations. Gentrification was concentrated in the southern half of the Borough, corresponding to the districts of Walthamstow and Leyton.

Evidence presented to the Housing Commission recently established by Waltham Forest Council (2023) supports these claims. The report states:

The demographics of the Borough have changed over the last ten years, and there is evidence of significant housing inequality and disproportionality. Whilst the south and central areas contain most of Waltham Forest’s ethnic minority population, long-term patterns are changing rapidly. The proportion of ethnic minority residents in southern areas of the Borough has fallen sharply, whilst Chingford and Highams Park have become more diverse.

When the market acts as a significant arbiter and provider for housing, accommodation prices dictate the location for poorer income families, who are in effect corralled into the same low rent high crime neighbourhoods. In such circumstances networks of pride and social solidarity can become undermined, and the children and young people who cannot escape the high levels of crime have little choice but to associate with established gang members (Pitts, 2010).

A recent report examining London-wide data on gangs and serious youth violence from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC 2022) observed:

We see disproportionality across youth violence. Over half of weapon enabled robbery (59%) and homicide (65%) suspects were Black. Victim profiles were more diverse (i.e., 56% of weapon enabled robbery victims were white). However, the majority of youth homicide victims were male (93%) and Black (61%) (ethnicity data uses police observed rather than self-reported).

One respondent in describing his work, said:

The majority of my case load is Caribbean, African and and Asian... I've got 18 at the minute, 16 are Black and Asian and 2 are White British, (ERP WF3).

However, a respondent from a national Black-led voluntary sector group suggested that the narrow focus of state agencies and the criminal justice system accounts for much of the disproportionality in the system:

I would prefer we did not always conceptualise the issue in terms of gangs. I know gangs are operating in communities across the country. I don't believe they are only Black-led gangs. I think they are all kinds of gangs in very diverse communities who are not on the radar of the police as far as I am concerned because many drugs are being circulated in the country and internationally. I do not think the Black gangs are necessarily at the core of that or have the greatest influence or resources. However, it impacts on our young people as it does in other ethnic groups (RVS 1).

Another respondent commented on the Metropolitan Police gangs database (the Matrix), which collected data and calculated the risks of young people thought to be associated with gangs:

People that were being disproportionately represented on a Matrix...Various young people we interviewed had received certain letters about gang activity or perceived gang activity and other young people from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups, they weren't particularly linked to any gangs... (RVS 2).

While some studies foreground a disproportionate focus by the criminal justice agencies on racialised communities to account for disproportionality, Palmer (2023) suggests that:

It is the case however, that the two explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, thus, whilst racism and discrimination accounts for some of the elevated figures of young Black people in the criminal justice system (Bowling & Phillips, 2007; Lammy, 2017), there also appears to be some evidence of disproportionately higher rates of offending and victimisation (Lea & Young, 1993; MORI Youth Survey, 2006; Dodd, 2010).

Palmer attributes this to the social trauma of racialisation and poverty.

It is recommended that the disproportionality of racialised communities in the criminal justice system is monitored and appropriate action taken to reduce unfair discrimination in the criminal justice processes. Specific programs of intervention should be designed by statutory and voluntary sector providers to focus on the traumatising effects of historic and contemporaneous racism and its relation to criminal involvement.

Waltham Forest Offences: Concerns, Violent Crime, and Gangs

Despite reductions in Serious Violent Crime across London since 2018 (MOPAC 2023), knife crime and gangs remain a significant cause for concern for Londoners, particularly those in the most deprived neighbourhoods, with 50% of Londoners agreeing that gun and knife crime should be a priority for the police and public services (Casey, 2023). MOPAC's Public Attitude Survey (2022) interviews 12,800 adult Londoners per year and reports that,

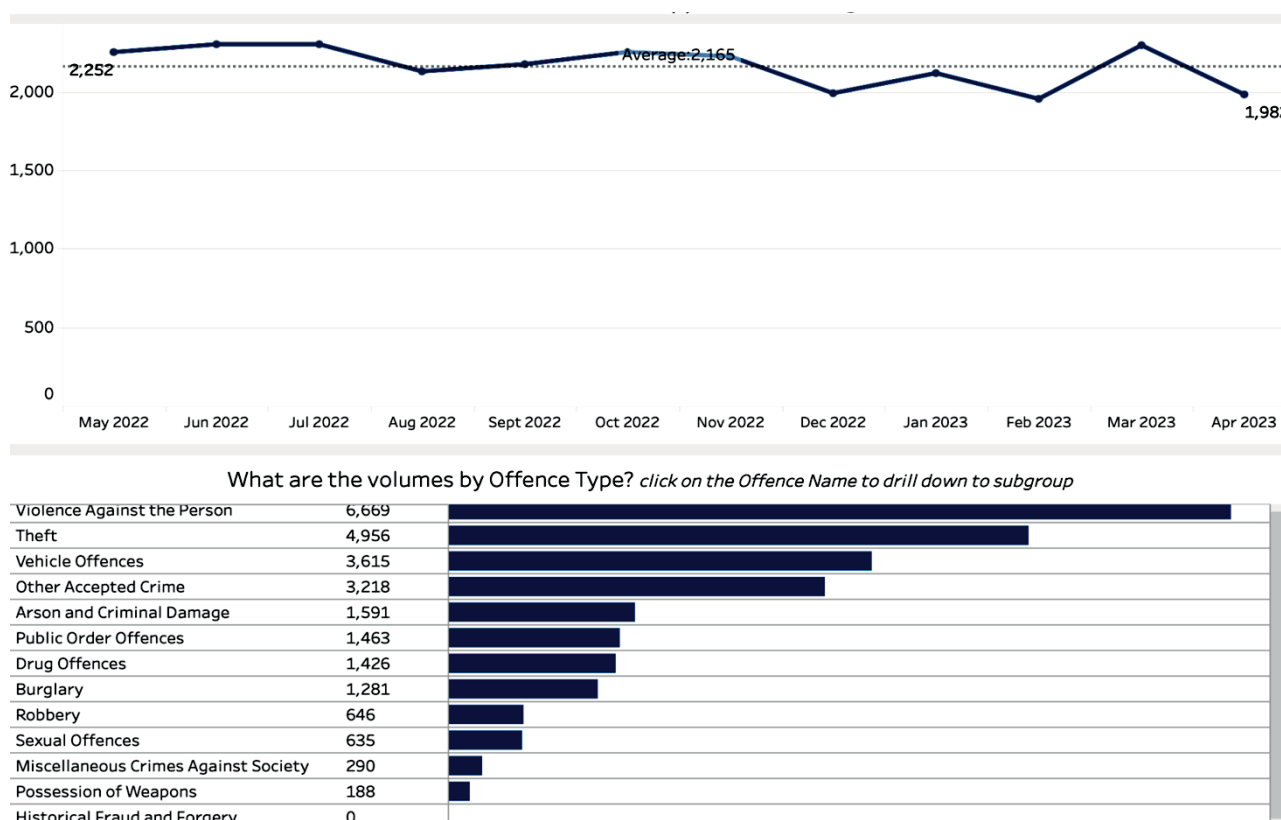
The proportion feeling violence-related issues were a problem has recently increased.

And that:

In Q4 21-22, three-quarters of Londoners felt knife crime was a problem locally, while two-thirds felt gangs were a problem... Londoners from Asian Ethnic Backgrounds are more worried about crime overall, while those from Mixed Ethnic Backgrounds are most likely to feel knife crime and gangs are a problem.

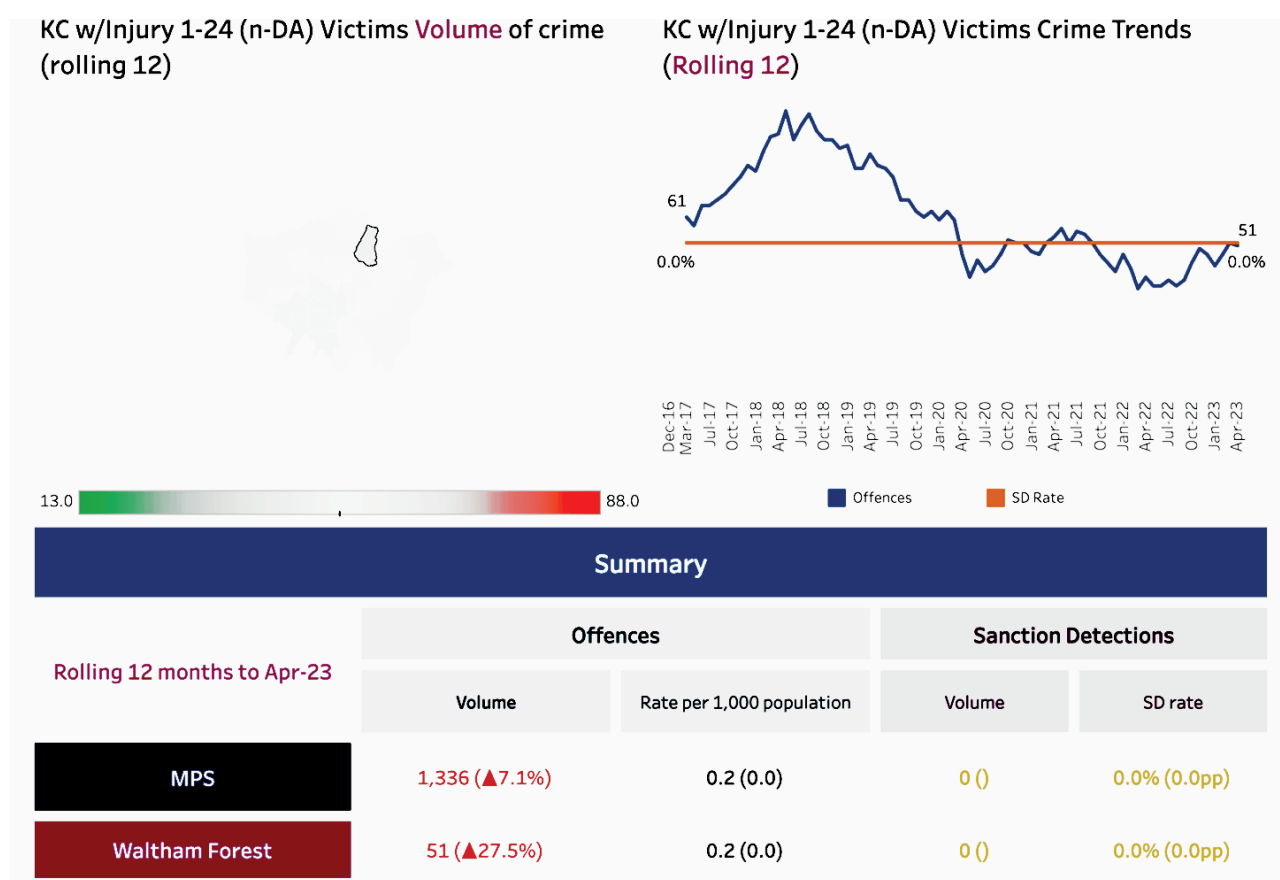
According to MOPAC, as of 18th June 2023, the Offence Count in Waltham Forest was 25,978 from May 2022 to April 2023. This equates to 93.8 offences per 100,000 of the population, which is a reduction of 1.2% of reported offences compared with the previous 12 months. London as a whole has a rate of 110.1 offences per 100,000 of the population.

Figure 1 Waltham Forest Offence by type May 2222-April 2023



Violence with Injury between May 2022 and April 2023, (2,071 offences) represent 7.4 per 100,000 of the population. This compares favourably with London as a whole with 8.8 offences per 100,000. However, Sanction Detections (the number of offences resolved by formal sanction) over the same period fell by 18.4%, resulting in a sanction detection rate that currently stands at 12.1%. In the rest of London Sanction Detections fell only by 8%.

Fig 2. Violence with Injury and Sanction Detection Rates



It is recommended that Waltham Forest BCU review the current discrepancies in Sanction Detection rates for Violence with Injury.

Part of the explanation for the fall in sanction detection rates could be attributed to victim withdrawal or refusal to give evidence for this type of offence. Other explanations for this disparity may involve prioritisation and resources. One respondent noted that:

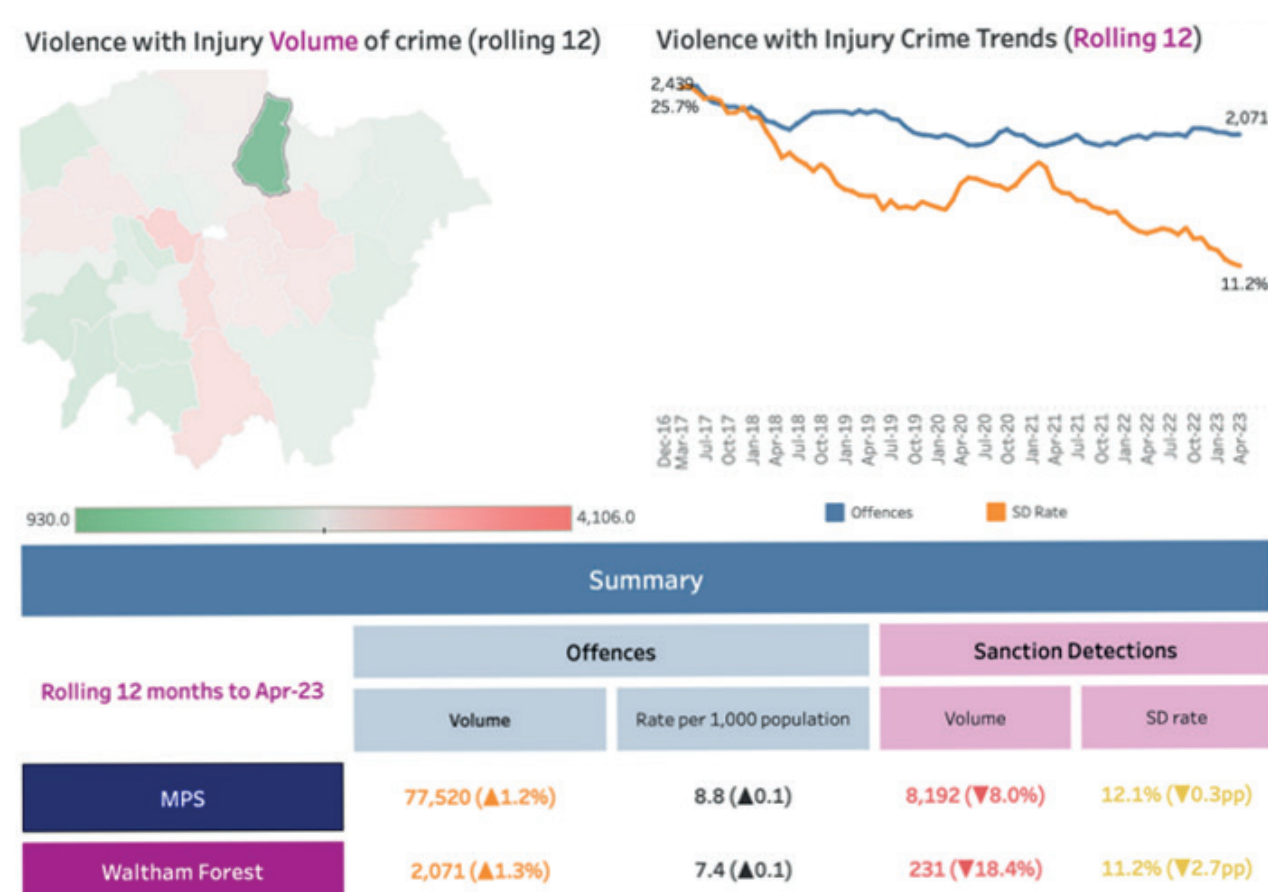
Waltham Forest and Newham merged police forces...a bigger and more problematic borough, more issues there in reality, the police will deny it, but they have absorbed more staff in what is going on in Newham, and Waltham Forest has suffered with the merger (POL 3).

Another respondent echoed this point when they said:

We have probably more difficulty with the exploitation and missing police team I guess to me that's declined over the time. I've worked in Waltham Forest and when I first started there was a specific gangs team based in the Borough and that team was then moved over to Newham and and ability to travel back to Waltham Forest was more difficult and then over the last year they were disbanded and it kind of cut absorbed into the the Missing Team and that team is much smaller and therefore much more stretched and I think that has been a a bit of a loss, (ERP L15).

Whilst it is currently difficult to assess which violent crime with injury is gang-related, as gang crime is not routinely flagged, non-Domestic Abuse, Violent Crime with a Knife for those under 25 is often utilised as a proxy measure for gang violence. For Waltham Forest, this type of offence has almost halved since its peak in 2018, but there has been a 27% increase between April 2022 and April 2023.

Figure 3. Knife Crime With Injury 1-24 Crime and Sanction Detection



The latest figures available (ONS 2017) indicate that about 7% of children aged between 10-15 years know a street gang member, and 0.7% of children are street gang members, with 4.4% of young people aged 15-25 who report knowing a street gang member and 0.2 admitting to being a street gang member. These figures are not disaggregated for Waltham Forest. However, for London, MOPAC (2022) asked 12,000 young Londoners aged 12 to 16 years about crime and safety, with 14% reporting they knew someone who carried a knife and 10% reported knowing someone in a gang. Moreover, 5% reported being threatened or hurt with a knife and 1% reported being in a gang. Exposure to such issues increased with age.

Previous Studies of Gangs and Child Criminal Exploitation In Waltham Forrest and Current Findings.

In the UK, the term 'gang' is contested and controversial and has led to what is termed the "UK Gangs Thesis Debate" However, an initial definition is essential for a "realistic" understanding of group offending (Andell, 2019). Pitts (2008) provided the first working definition for gangs in the UK, potentially providing a strategic position for academics and policymakers to explore deeper causal tendencies. The research project has participated in current work undertaken by Crest Advisory and ONS to develop accurate standardised research instruments for young people and gangs for the Crime Survey for England and Wales, which also accounts for criminal exploitation.

Subsequently, Crest Advisory and ONS in collaboration with several other experts and agencies, have developed a definition of gangs for 10-25 yr olds. They suggest, by "gang", we mean a group:

- Which has a shared group identity, such as a name
 - Who get involved in violent, threatening, or criminal acts together
 - Which may involve young people being asked or told to do things by others, such as carrying drugs or weapons
- (Crest Advisory 2023).

The definition adopts a pragmatism useful for large scale quantitative analysis, however appears to overlook the structural elements mentioned previously and does not specify the different types of evolutionary moments which are important in a shared identity. The first gang study in Waltham Forest suggests a definition which focused primarily on gangs as a response to inner-city poverty and structural disadvantage (Pitts, 2008) that impacted local neighbourhoods. Pitts' early research provides a clear baseline to analyse gangs from the perspective of the interplay between social structure, culture and individual biography (Mills, 1958). At that time, some marginalised young peoples' transcendence into the drugs business, through a search for "respect and reward", was forewarned. Pitts charted overlapping networks involved in the drugs business that ranged from organised crime families to street gangs. However, the severe street violence and conflict he observed were in part a defence of territory related to conflicts over drug dealing (Whittaker & Densley, 2020). Pitts (2008) established that a small number of the more dominant gangs had moved into the drugs market across East London, working in concert with more established "family firms". The Beaumont Crew became the major supplier in the Waltham Forest area through an alliance with gangs in neighbouring boroughs (Pitts, 2008, p.69). However, many gangs were also focused on other forms of crime, such as street robbery and some "street collectives" did not regard crime as a core activity. However, those gangs involved in drug sales set the style and values adopted by other less powerful gangs for whom crime was a more marginal activity (Pitts, 2008, p.71). These evolutions are well documented, and Pitts (2023) reflects on early gangs studies to make this point when he quotes Thrasher (1929):

If conditions are favourable to its continued existence, the gang tends to undergo a sort of natural evolution from a diffuse and loosely organised group into the solidified unit which represents the matured gang and which may take one of several different forms.

Whittaker et al. (2020), in a similar vein, argue:

Research demonstrates that factors internal and external to the gang contribute to its 'maturation' (Gottschalk, 2017) and over time, gangs shift from a focus on youthful, recreational, non-delinquent pursuits (i.e., Thrasher 1927) to financial gains, whereby crime becomes more central to group identity (Densley 2012, 2014; McLean, 2018).

In Waltham Forest, Havard and Whittaker (2018) suggested, increases in serious street violence are directly linked to the drug business. They describe changes in which the earlier models of neighbourhood gangs evolved into more organised drug sales networks operating beyond the confines of local postcodes, developing towards an economically driven model. Violence in the illicit economy of drug markets is explained by Reuter (2008). He suggests:

Contracts cannot be enforced through written documents and the legal system; agreements are made hurriedly, sometimes in ambiguous code, and orally. Territories cannot be allocated through bidding for desirable locations since there is no enforceable ownership of property for these purposes. All these factors can lead to violence for a variety of purposes.

According to Harvard and Whittaker (2018), a major development occurred in Waltham Forest in 2015 when the Beaumont Crew splintered, and The Mali Boys emerged as a rival drug distribution network. They incorporated members of other Waltham Forest gangs to fulfil minor roles in a growing organisation which controlled a substantial part of the illicit drug trade in Essex, East London and East Anglia. Densley (2014) suggests that some gangs can evolve:

... from recreational and criminal stages to financial goal orientation (before reaching) the highest developmental stage, (at which) gangs resemble not just crime that is organised, but organised crime.

Current Gang Activities, Alliances and Conflicts.

Havard and Whittaker (2018) produced a table of the main gangs in Waltham Forest and noted the changes that have occurred over a 10-year period since Pitts study in 2008. The figure below makes recent additions to this table. The main differences that have emerged in the preceding 5 years have resulted from new alliances and the attendant conflicts. Since 2018 a new gang, the Chingford Mount Trappers has emerged and is reported to have alliances with the Marli Boys and to be in conflict with the Chingford Hall gang.

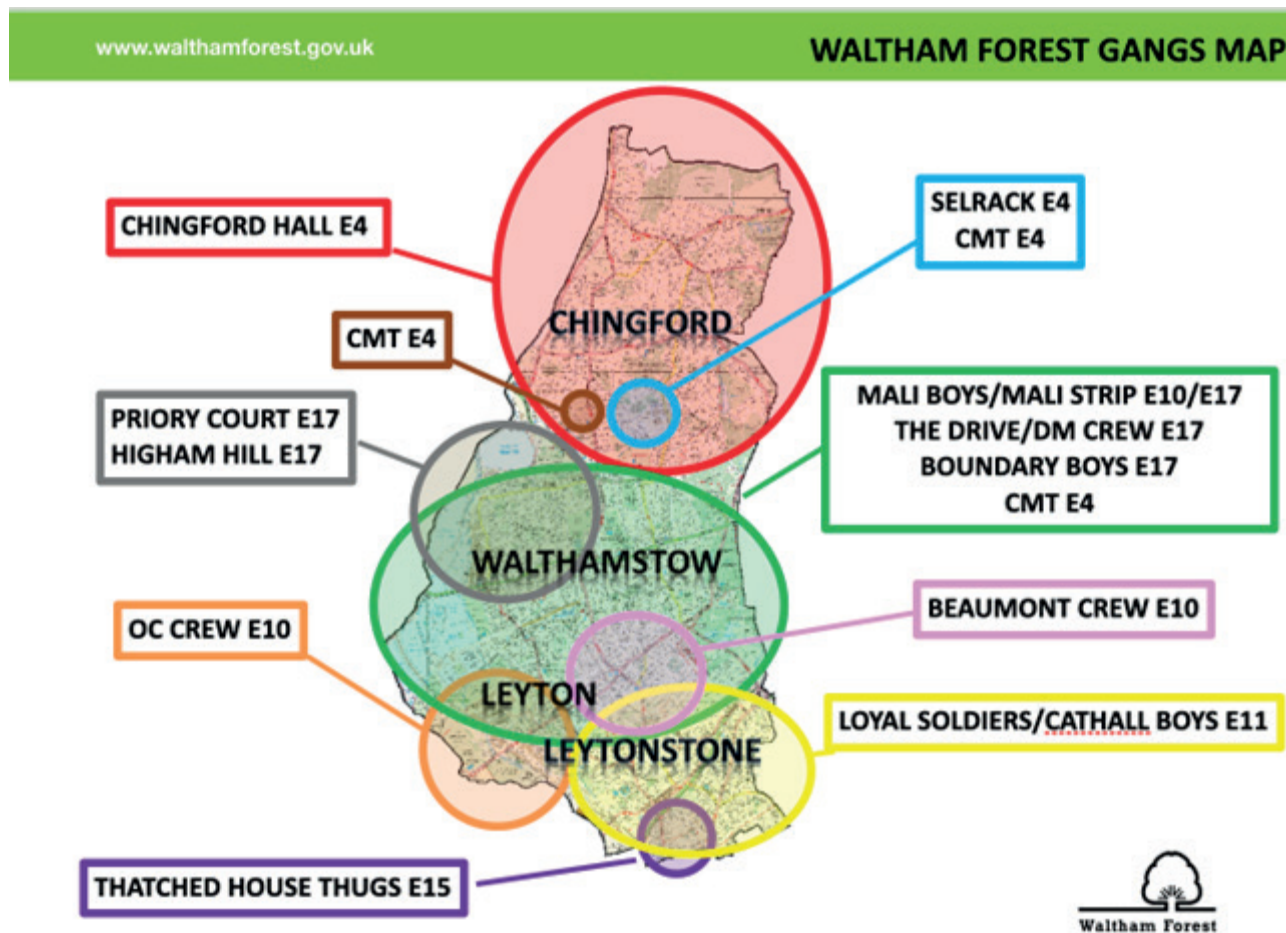
Figure 4. List of main gangs in Waltham Forest 2023 as compared with previous studies.

Gangs listed by Pitts study 2008	Gangs listed by Havard and Whittaker's study 2018	Gangs listed by Andell's study 2023
1. Beaumont E10	1. Beaumont Crew E10	1. Beaumont Crew E10
2. Boundary/Monserrat	2. Boundary Boys E17	2. Boundary Boys E17
3. Priory Court	3. Priory Court E17	3. Priory Court E17
4. Drive	4. The Drive/DM Crew E17	4. The Drive/DM Crew E17
5. Piff City	5. Mali Boys/Mali Strip E10/E17	5. Mali Boys/Mali Strip E10/E17
6. Red African Devils	6. Loyal Soldiers/Cathall Boys E11	6. Loyal Soldiers/Cathall Boys E11
7. Canhall	7. Chingford Hall E4	7. Chingford Hall E4
8. Barrier/Brookscroft	8. Selrack E4	8. Selrack E4
9. Highams Park	9. Stoneydown E17	9. Coppermill E17
10. New World Order	10. Coppermill E17	10. OC Crew E10
11. Asian Auto Theft	11. OC Crew E10	11. Thatched House Thugs E15
12. Hackney Overground Commuters	12. Thatched House Thugs E15	12. Chingford Mount Trappers
13. Russian/Lithuanian/Polish Gangs		

Havard and Whittaker (2018) note that:

Of the gangs identified in the original study, only four (Beaumont Crew, Priory Court, Drive and Boundary remain active and had evolved into more developed entities.

Figure 5: Waltham Forest Gang Map (Illustrations by Richard Graham).



The main gangs in Waltham Forest remain the same as those observed in 2018, with the addition of a new gang, the Chingford Mount Trappers. The Mali Boys continue to be the major gang in Waltham Forest with a tightening hold on the illegal drugs business both within and beyond the Borough. So much so in fact that they are now regarded by the police as an Organised Crime Group (OCG).

Although there are many definitions of Serious Organised Crime (SOC), Albanese (2008) found the most frequent characteristics to be a continuing organisational hierarchy, obtaining rational profit through crime, the use of force or threat and the corruption of public officials to maintain immunity.

The Commission of the European Communities and Europol (2001) identify 11 basic traits of a criminal organisation, these include "Using violence or other means suitable for intimidation" and "Using some form of discipline and control", usually exercised through violence and the threat of violence. Dame Carol Black's report (2020) suggests that homicides and other forms of violence stemming from County Lines and illicit markets have emerged recently as a significant criminal justice issue in the UK, with fifty per cent of homicides associated with these drug markets.

Decker and Pyrooz (2013) suggest some overlap in the characteristics of organised crime and gang-related crime but point to differences in organisation or the degree in which a group can effectively co-ordinate activities in a structured way. Hagedorn (1994), frames this distinction in terms of the level

of organisation in drug markets; i.e. whether gangs were organised drug distributors or gang members were “freelance” drug dealers. Pitts (2008) and Harvard and Whittaker (2018) suggest that there is less separation between organised crime groups and street gangs in Waltham Forest, and the principal gangs are on a trajectory towards more organised criminal activities. One respondent said:

The Mali Boys are called a gang, but they operate as an organised crime network, in terms of the structure because they have links to other organizations ... they're bigger than a gang if that makes sense... (ERP WF9)

Another Said:

We know skunk is cultivated within the UK, now the majority of heroin crack and Class A drugs are still coming in from abroad so because they have those links and the trust by the upper echelons of the Gang world they can buy in bulk wholesale level, you're talking about serious criminal organised networks not gangs, Mali Boys is the only one in Waltham Forest actually classified as a criminal network, (POL3).

Another said:

...the Mali gang don't operate the way they used to, they are a criminal organisation now, like McDonalds, they have franchises, the Mali Boys have franchises too...we know they have links with Kent and Essex, God we've even had Swindon, there's new ones popping up all the time (ERP WF2).

Another said:

What I found different to other Borough's is it's not just post code led...the dominant gang in the Borough is the Mali Boys, they've got lots of little pockets in other parts of the Borough... all over really so we are quite close to Essex so we have them going into Clacton, Southend, Basildon, Harlow, so they've got places up in Norfolk, Swindon, so we've also got a couple going to Wales, (ERP WF9).

A respondent gave details of a franchising model, said to be operating in Waltham Forest:

I think the other aspect of County Lines is the gangs offering much more of a franchising set up now. So we've had it in Waltham Forest where we've had under 15 year olds, who were historically groomed, dealing for the Mali Boys, and what they did was clubbed in the money that they made from that so I don't know £200 quid each and then bought £1000 of drugs from the Mali Boys to sell independently so you are almost getting gangs forming who are using established gangs as a franchise for the benefits. They get protection from the Mali Boys 'cos they bought the gear and they can say that they are running with the Marli Boys. But all the Mali Boys are doing is saying give us £1,000, here's your crack now off you go...What you are seeing increasingly is independent groups of young people buying drugs off the gangs and going off and selling it themselves...if they get nicked by the police and the drugs seized it's all on them, nothing to do with the Mali Boys.

The reputational capital of the Mali Boys is an important part of the deal in these alliances. The Mali Boys are regarded as ruthless and relentless in pursuit of their enemies and for those entering a franchise with them this holds the promise of both higher status and protection (Bourgoise, 1995). Previous research has also identified franchising arrangements in other parts of the country (Andell & Pitts, 2018). In this arrangement, stronger, more organised gangs with a reputation for violence absorb less developed groups, which can serve to transform delinquent peer groups into street gangs that will facilitate drug distribution and serious violence as required (Atuesta, 2020).

A respondent commented on the evolution of the Chingford Mount Trappers In Waltham Forest:

In the last couple of years 2020-21 probably, we were starting to hear of a new group emerging which had 12-13 year olds, it started with ASB being annoying throwing stuff, being annoying to the community, and then very rapidly they became what we now know as the Chingford Mount Trappers or CMT. as they are now, used by bigger gangs, they're being absorbed by bigger gangs...(ERP WF2).

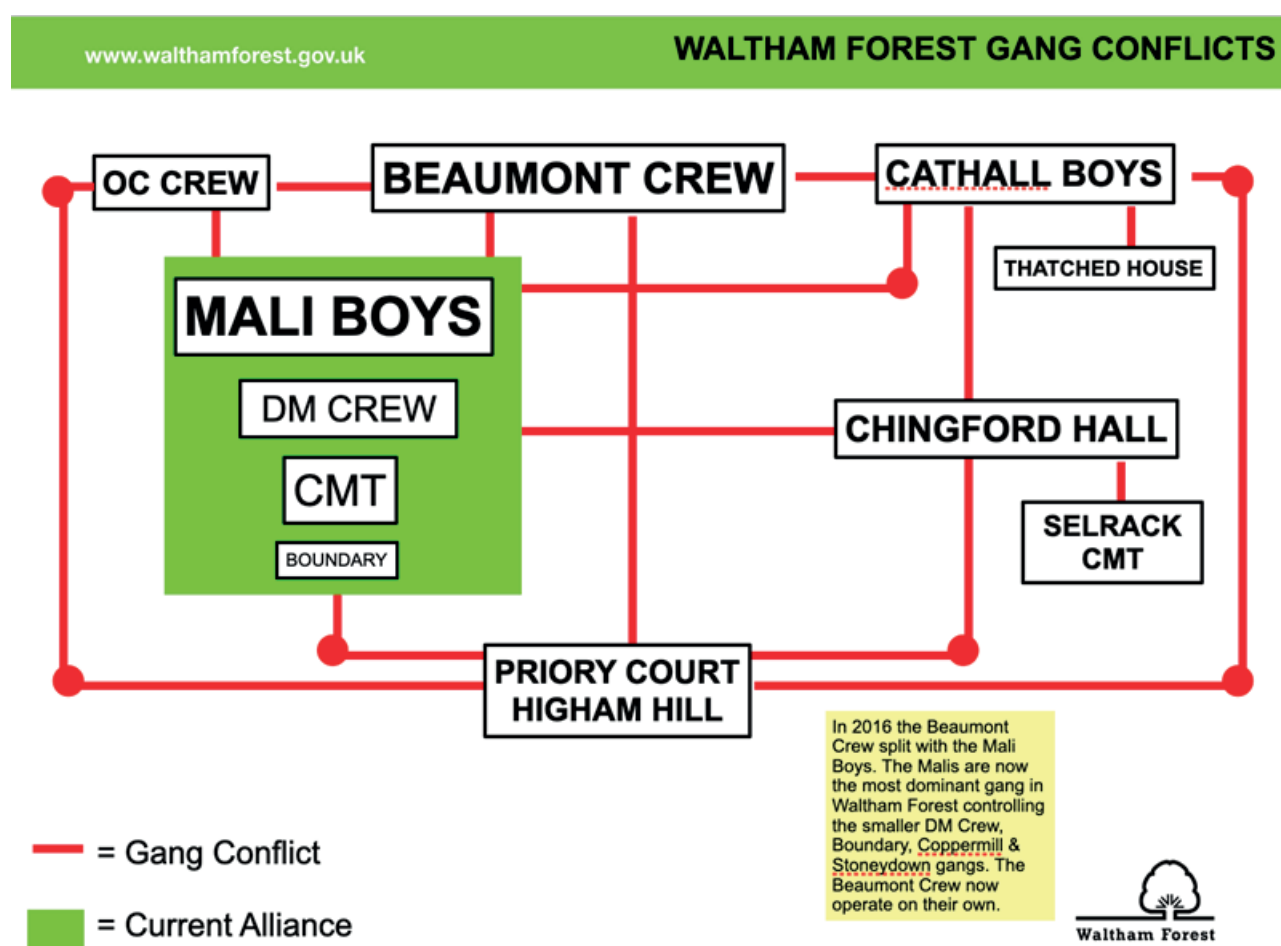
Another respondent said:

So like the Chingford Mount Trappers, they started as an offending peer group, then at some point it became more than offending and anti-social behaviour, because they started to get involved in violence and drug dealing, (ERP WF9).

Another confirmed this. They said:

We have seen the emergence of a new group in the Chingford area called Chingford Mount Trappers coming to notice for Anti-Social Behaviour escalated to group drug offences then County lines and then being arrested for really serious offences...(ERP WF9).

Figure 6: Current Gang Alliances and Conflicts (Illustration produced by Richard Graham).



A respondent explained that some of the current conflicts were rooted historically:

Previously, criminal families linked to anti-social behaviour in certain estates in Waltham Forest who got together and said to the old independent drug dealers piss off we're running things now...a lot of beef has been inherited historically, the issues with these groups sort of stuck, (POL 3).

However, it should be noted that violence in drug markets is also multi-factorial, and Friman (2009) argues it can be:

...due to factors including shifting power balances within or between contending organisations, the impact of state enforcement efforts, and the erosion of accommodations due to market saturation or broader economic pressures — can unleash new waves of consolidation efforts and associated violence.

Theories of organised crime in drug sales can offer explanations of violence associated with illegal drug markets. Reuter (2008) suggests:

The markets for illegal goods and services operate without the usual protections against fraud and violence offered by the court system.

The degree of stability in an illicit market tends to shape levels of violence, with increasing stability leading to less violence, with violence avoidance being the preferred option (Pearson & Hobbs, 2001). Schneider, (2013) suggests that:

...systemic drug-related violence is more likely to be found in drug markets that are unstable. These unstable markets are often emergent and characterised by what economists call “pure competition”. In such illicit markets, producers or sellers are more pre-occupied with their competitors and gaining (or retaining) market share, which then contributes to instability and hence introduces a greater risk of violence as a means to regulate the conflict that emerges from this competition.

One respondent mentioned conflicts due to market instability in Waltham Forest. They said:

As with anything if you remove a layer you just create another layer. So if the head is removed there'll be a restructure, so someone will always assume that role. What will happen is other gangs will see that as a sign of weakness and they'll be fighting over X road because your head has disappeared, so while you fight over who becomes the head we're gonna take that road from you, (ERP L2).

Reuter (2008) suggests levels of violence appear to be more spectacular and pernicious at the mid and lower levels of dealing networks due to lower-level managers wishing to ascend by reputation and to maintain control over the workforce through disciplinary violence. He argues that:

A promising mid-level manager cannot readily provide evidence of performance to another potential employer; as a consequence, higher-level managers get weaker market signals and may withhold deserved merit increases. This gives incentives to lower-level agents to use violence for upward mobility.

This type of violence was recalled by one respondent who said:

...violence exists for punishment within County Lines, punishment for mishandling commodities, in stash houses, and to bring attention to themselves. We had a young individual who crashed a County Lines car, he was only a 14-year-old lad. Drew huge attention to himself. The elders of the line came down and they stabbed him in the arm multiple times because of his mistake to set him straight. That kind of violence keeps people in line (EOC 1).

According to respondent accounts over the past 5 years elders from some gangs, particularly the Mali Boys, have continued to distance themselves from visible neighbourhood drug dealing and associated online conflicts. One respondent told us:

...they are not doing video's calling out their opposite numbers, they are just not doing that type of stuff, their role is the sale of drugs and making money... there are a lot of adults at the top but younger when it comes down the chain... (ERP WF2).

However, despite elders distancing themselves from street transactions, they sometimes involve themselves in instrumental violence. One respondent gave an example. They said:

I've seen people from out of area come in and enforce debts usually from within the gang. Sometimes individuals like to send a message and say this is coming from me (ESOC 1).

In the move towards less visible and more specific control, sub-lines are utilised in County Line drug dealing, a respondent told us:

....certainly over the last couple of years that progressed, and they (Mali Boys) were probably one of the first to use sub-lines within force areas. They've got their main drug line and name whatever the line you want it to be, using different phones so the sub line is actually being traced back to a 15 year old it's not going back to the Mali boys and there's a whole train of disconnected phones which are not the control phone...(ESOC 2)

Gang elders are said to source and plan the distribution and sales of multiple kilos of illegal drugs within and beyond Waltham Forest and utilise other gangs or gang youngers to conduct operational management:

Their evolution's gone from running a drug line to running networks everywhere and they're all standing back ... so his drug lines run from London into Essex into the West Midlands into Manchester and also into Dundee ... it showed all his messaging between an Albanian organised crime group where he was getting his wholesale supply (CLI 1).

Moreover, the shifts towards monopolisation in drug markets appear to have increased violence. This violence can be attributed to an attempt to eliminate the competition and establish a reputation for efficiency and effectiveness in the higher echelons of the drugs supply chain which will, in turn, give the gang exclusive access to bulk supplies of illicit drugs (Schneider, 2013).

One respondent informed us that the sourcing of bulk products (multi-kilos) of cannabis, cocaine and heroin, is only open to a trusted few. They said:

It's going to be probably a few across London to get the consignment of drugs so there's a dialogue between bulk suppliers and the board members (leaders) of these gangs (CLI 1).

Once monopolies are established, violence is said to reduce due to the establishment of a recognised hierarchy (Schneider, 2013). The involvement of well organized, hierarchically structured, gangs in the supply of drugs in Waltham Forest is generally regarded as more entrenched and than elsewhere. One experienced practitioner explained:

What you have got is a situation with the drugs market (that) is monopolised by gangs, you can't get drugs from anyone other than a gang member within Waltham Forest, especially children... the issues that we face is it's all controlled by gangs. (POL3).

Several other respondents mentioned this development, with another saying:

The only way to buy drugs in Waltham Forest is from a gang, (ERP L15).

This move towards monopolization gained impetus during and immediately after the Covid lockdowns.

The Impacts of Covid-19 and Lockdown.

The economic impact of Covid on some of the most deprived households in the borough, and its relationship with both criminality and criminal victimization, has been outlined previously in the report. Lockdown measures from March 2020 to March 2021 curtailed non-essential contact and travel significantly. As expected, this resulted in changes in the modus operandi of sellers and users in Waltham Forest drug markets. According to a national survey of 2621 drug purchasers conducted by Release (2021), most did not have difficulty finding a supplier, or a desired drug, at the start of the pandemic. However, some difficulties were experienced as the first national lockdown eased because of supply shortages. Prices went up while the purity of the drugs remained the same.

Before the Covid lockdowns, Waltham Forest young people associated with drug dealing gangs were found in locations in England, Scotland and Wales. One worker commented:

We started getting kids coming through for possession with intent to supply, picked up at some coastal town, I mean the furthest that I've personally had was in Haverfordwest, in West Wales... (ERP WF7)

Some respondents also noted an increase of drug dealing locally during lockdown. One respondent said:

I still see young people exploited into County lines, it seems like similar locations that we had pre-lockdown, so we may have more local areas but there is still some areas like Norfolk, that has always been one, pre or post lockdown (ERP WF5).

Another said:

We've seen more young people being picked up for intent to supply locally...you might have someone from Walthamstow who is at a cuckooed address in Chingford, so even though they are not that far the method is still County Lines, (ERP WF9).

A research briefing from the University of Nottingham suggests that during the lockdown, due to increased visibility of those involved in County Lines, the rail network was utilised less in favour of car hire to travel to "out of town" destinations and more local children were used in the re-supply of drugs, or to collect money (Brewster et al, 2021). Respondents in Waltham Forest also observed changes in transportation. One said:

I think the methods were changed...I think most of the transport chain was closed during lockdown...I have reports that a child was seen on Snap Chat in the back of a vehicle...but it seems like it's into more vehicles as opposed to trains, not just lockdown but post lockdown (ERP WF5).

There was also a shift from 'long-distance' to local drug dealing. This was partly to avoid the greater chance of detection in sparsely populated town and city centres, but also to ensure that the children running the drugs could complete their task in one day, thus avoiding being identified as 'missing' and thereby subject to investigation by the authorities. A respondent said:

I think gangs are getting quite savvy about missing reports. They're doing more localised county lines so they can get back in time and no one realises that they've gone, they can't be reported missing (ERP 16).

One respondent said that even with reduced travel, the impacts of exploitation on young people were just the same:

It didn't change anything for them "out there"...In the early days workers were all at home, but we were still working all of the time, young people were only travelling 2 miles from home but we were still at the active sites, they were involved in robbery drugs and weapons its a new pandemic but nothing has changed, (V WF3).

Respondents also mentioned the greater vulnerability of some children due to increased domestic abuse in the family home. One said:

There was an increase in concerns around domestic violence... we know it's impacted people, (ERP L5).

Services for harder-to-reach, vulnerable adults and young people were curtailed during the lockdown. One respondent said:

Over Covid we've had a gap in service, (ERP WF5).

However, Technology was used to bring staff together for meetings and to contact young people directly via video, phone and messaging.

However, the NSPCC (2022) warned that:

It is recognised that contacting children and families via phone also has limitations. For example, the practitioner's ability to read body language and understand the potential impact of the work will be reduced.

Grooming by gangs were also enabled by technology. Brewster et al. (2022) note an increase in online criminal exploitation grooming in their study of County Lines during the pandemic. One respondent from Waltham Forest likened online grooming for child criminal exploitation to a form of radicalisation and said:

Social media has really had an impact, ... its the equivalent of having a gang member sat on the end of your child's bed and letting them talk to your child all night, its part of the control, the whole radicalisation is via phones, via social media (Pol 3).

Another observed that:

Much of this exploitation is done online ... so we've seen an increase of people being recruited to sell drugs through Snapchat (ERP L14).

Another respondent said:

We saw a lot more things taking place online, young people were talking about being groomed and presented with opportunities. Tick tock seemed to be the most used one and Snapchat (ERH L2).

Research by Gill et al. (2022), which informs the new Online Safety Bill (2023) pointed to the risks of the online environment for young people and suggests:

...a key message from this study is the speed at which online developments take place, and the importance of parents/carers and professionals staying up to date with these too, so they can support children and young people to navigate new online spaces and safeguard them from harm.

Waltham Forest currently provides free online harm reduction groups for parents to raise awareness of some of the dangers of gangs, grooming and social media, as well as providing some education sessions for young people in some schools. Online interventions were mentioned by several practitioners as good practice both in and beyond the Borough.

The forthcoming Online Safety Act is likely to utilise the remote statutory powers of Ofcom to ensure social media and tech companies monitor and remove harmful content, including drug sales (DFSIT 2022). The impact of such powers locally is yet to be tested. Irwin-Rogers et al. (2018) argue that this notion of engagement with young people where they choose to meet is changing in light of the advent of online communication. Blurring boundaries between the virtual and online worlds raises questions about how practitioners might respond meaningfully to youth violence in this new digital context.

It may be the case that workers will now need to develop new digital engagement skills if they are to respond to issues such as gangs and youth violence.

Most respondents agreed that online grooming in CCE presented a challenge and was an issue that needs further attention. Young people mentioned social media as a gateway to the risk of exploitation. One respondent talked about the dangers of financial exploitation through the illicit utilisation of bank details. They said:

Well I think social media obviously during lockdown, Tick-tock, popped up Instagram was being used more, Twitter obviously, all of them, but I say more Snapchat as well, I don't think it has been mentioned but exploitation in the sense of money mules, (WFFG 3).

Techno-prevention techniques utilised by the former Child Exploitation Online Protection Agency is viewed as best practice to disrupt online grooming, and they also produced online resources for teaching internet safety (CEOP ndg). Similar techniques could be applied to online CCE and the sale of illegal drugs in prevention and in pursuit of potential online groomers.

The BCU should enlist specialist enforcement services to track online grooming and drug sales. Internet Safety concerning CCE should be taught as part of PSHE in all Waltham Forest Schools.

The Falling Age of Child Exploitation and Education Services

Many respondents commented on the lowering of the age of children targeted for exploitation in Waltham Forest. Respondents spoke of young people not coming to the notice of the Missing Team as they skip school for short periods of time on “day trips” to deliver drugs. It was mentioned that safeguarding professionals are not always aware of brief missing periods. Whether this is a result of the “localisation” of drug operations during Covid or a strategy to exploit “clean skins” (children without a criminal record) it is difficult to say. One respondent mentioned:

We are seeing a much younger cohort. It seems to be that the most of it starts with secondary school in particular, so 11 to 12. We have had a 10 year old but that was a one off, probably, never had another 10 year old but 12 is becoming the most common age in terms of what's being presented to us, (ERP L2).

School-based information programmes like the MPS's Growing Against Violence, which aims to deter young people from gang involvement, have been evaluated positively (Densley, 2013), but work is also needed to support school staff to help them recognise signs of ‘grooming’ and the behaviours they might expect from young people who have been ‘groomed’. Unexplained absence is a key indicator of probable gang involvement, and systems for identifying these absences quickly and informing the police, the safeguarding authority and parents is essential to safeguard vulnerable young people.

Work in schools should be systematic: Current school interventions provided by the voluntary sector, VRP and Youth at Risk teams, while useful, are ad hoc.

In a recent audit of multi-agency identification of risk and harm assessment in criminal exploitation (2022) questions were raised concerning the education sector's input into multi-agency safeguarding work. The report noted that:

Unfortunately, despite best attempts, there was no representation at the discussion forum from education settings whom it was felt were a key partner to the MASH audit process, particularly concerning exploring the involvement of school settings for this audit.

Further awareness-raising work should be undertaken with school and college providers to ensure that safeguarding missing checks are consistently carried out and appropriate information is exchanged, particularly for pupils who go missing for short periods of time.

All schools in Waltham Forest should provide Child Criminal Exploitation awareness as part of the Physical Health, Mental Well-being and Internet Safety curriculum.

School Exclusion

Several respondents thought schools were able to exclude young people too easily. One respondent said:

From my experience, young people can be excluded for something quite minor (ERP L9)

Respondents mentioned that too many young people are excluded from school and referred to pupil referral units (PRU's). However the offending of a significant number of these children escalates as they link up with others engaged in offending or involved with gangs and drug dealing. This is a key turning point for many young people excluded from mainstream education. Colleges in Waltham Forest were also thought to sometimes erect barriers which prevent young people who are in trouble with the law returning to education. One respondent said:

One of the issues that we're trying to tackle and challenge at the moment is around our post-16 offer and young people just not being allowed to enrol or having their college education placements retracted based on their offending even if that offence was a year old and so young people get punished twice, (ERP L10).

Independent advocacy services were thought to be available for young people at risk of exclusion, but when pressed, some workers were unable to name specific services available.

It is recommended that mechanisms are sought to ensure pupils have further access to, and are sustained in, mainstream education services:

This should entail the training of school Governors who sit on exclusion panels, and access to independent advocacy services for pupils should be an essential part of any exclusion process.

A clear memorandum of understanding should be drawn up between local colleges and the local authority to clarify college admissions with regard to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act

Alternative provision should aim to reintegrate pupils back to mainstream education as quickly as possible.

Criminal Exploitation: Youth Work, YOS, Youth At Risk, Early Help and Safeguarding.

Good practice identified by research and practice in other geographic locations suggests establishing a co-located multi-agency Gang Intervention Team (Andell & Pitts 2018) to deliver a comprehensive gangs strategy (see later in the report). One respondent said that there was already a community-based initiative led by Project Zero, delivering a range of services in partnership with the local authority:

We already have a thriving voluntary sector youth provider called Project Zero based in Walthamstow. They've got a council building that has been given to them on a cheap lease. They have been running youth provision; they've got a holistic centre. They have health providers coming in, they have mental health, they have sexual health, they have healthy eating, they've got lots of partnerships with different people. They also provide their youth club, they do holiday provision and then they do targeted provision, and they also do a bit of alternative provision. They're a flagship in our Borough and they're doing it hand to mouth with hardly any money (ERP L13).

Similar types of intervention are recommended later in this report as part of the development of Youth Hubs in Waltham Forest. This would also include work from a co-located Gangs Intervention Team composed of professionals from policing, adolescent safeguarding, youth work, education, child and adolescent mental health, peer mentoring, employment & training and housing (see below). However, it would be important that these professionals have the ability and the authority to influence practice and policy within their agencies of origin. Members of this team would also have the knowledge, skills and flexibility to work on an outreach basis with both young people and community members and community groups in gang-affected neighbourhoods. The development of such specialist skills is acknowledged best practice in gangs work (Andell & Pitts, 2018), and it is further recognised that these skills need to be imparted in more general practice too. One respondent said:

I think there's always a need for specialist services but there needs to be parity in terms of the understanding and impact that their interventions can have so every social worker can feel empowered to support young people when there are concerns about criminal exploitation and young people, not just 'we will refer them to this specialist team' (ERPL4).

Both detached and outreach youth work is reported as an essential tool for gang intervention work (Pitts 432006).

Youth Work

Youth workers have traditionally foregrounded person-centred and experiential practices to engage, assist and empower young people with any issue they may bring to the professional relationship. According to Harris and Seal (2023), youth work is distinct from other professions that educate and engage with young people due to the voluntary nature of the relationship and open accessibility of workers to any issues brought by young people in what is known as universal provision. Universalism and voluntarism are said to assist young people in becoming more psychologically invested as active agents. This investment may be significant when young people involved in gangs and criminality lose control over their future or the meaning of their reality (Harris & Seal, op cit).

In Waltham Forest, universal youth provision has suffered severely from national cutbacks due to Austerity. One respondent said:

I've been around for a while, and I remember in 2012, I think it was when they basically decimated Youth Services, and I think there was something like 60- 65 youth workers it went down to 12, and I had lots of friends you know lots of colleagues that worked as youth workers lost their jobs, and it's never really recovered from that unfortunately, (ERP L13)

The reduction in universal youth provision is mirrored across the country, and Townsend (2023) reports that expenditure by councils on youth services has fallen by more than 70%. Currently, in Waltham Forest, targeted youth work is mainly undertaken by commissioned services from the voluntary sector. 'Detached' youth work or street-based youth work seeks to engage young people in the geographical territory they inhabit (e.g. public spaces, parks, shopping centres). Pinkney et al. (2018) draw on a tradition of 'On-Road' criminology to conceptualise 'On Road' youth work. In this model, youth workers with 'street social capital' (Sandberg, 2008) can work in spaces occupied by gang-involved or affiliated young people that other workers may not feel able to.

Peer mentoring is a youth work approach which utilises individuals, often those with 'Lived Experience' (LE), to provide guidance and support. Smart (2023) foregrounds the value of peer mentoring as a useful way to develop empathy with clients who are often drawn from marginalised communities where trust is difficult to establish. The empathic relationships developed through peer mentors are therefore more likely to establish trust and have greater success in sign-posting these young people to other adolescent services such as gang desistance services.

Work with harder-to-reach adolescents in Waltham Forest is mainly commissioned by the Borough from Spark 2 Life, Project Zero, Change Live Grow (CLG) and Abianda. However, the expectations and time frames for targeted work was thought to be unrealistic. One worker said:

Hard to gauge the expectation, I do not think it is realistic sometimes, especially when they give you a short timeframe...you can't put a timeframe on change... When you build a good solid foundational relationship through mentoring, then all of a sudden, the funding has been cut off, (ERP L3).

Some voluntary sector services, such as CGL are co-located with the YOS and this is said to promote good information exchanges and useful co-working. However, other services do not have access to IT systems such as Child View or Mosaic which can cause issues for recording attendances or planning work.

Levels of permissions to access necessary information could be designed for differing interventions needed without compromising broader confidentiality, thus allowing for better access and information exchanges on IT systems.

When asked about commissioning and planning forums with the voluntary sector it was mentioned that these types of meetings do not occur regularly and not all the relevant voluntary sector partners are invited to the Exploitation and Risk Panel.

Harris and Seal (2023), argue promoting young people's desistance (cessation from) gang involvement, crime and violence requires youth workers to also think beyond this inter-personal level and engage with the wider circles of influence in the young person's environment (i.e. the young people's peer groups, families and the wider community).

Further inter-agency work needs to be developed in conjunction with the voluntary sector as part of a co-located gangs team if longer-term planning for harder-to-reach young people is to be set in a neighbourhood context.

Youth Offending Services, Youth at Risk, and the Violence Reduction Unit

Waltham Forest YOS is not a separate youth offending team but comes under the umbrella of the Youth and Family Resilience Service. This includes children missing from education and those with behavioural problems. It was thought that because a range of interventions come under one service, it is possible to offer intensive support to limit some school exclusions and missing episodes. Children who go missing and are found in other parts of the country are brought back to Waltham Forest by the Rescue and Response service, which covers several other boroughs in London. Missing interviews were thought to be conducted routinely when children are reported or discovered as missing (see above). However, liaison between other police services and Waltham Forest was sometimes an issue of concern. One respondent said:

I think police information is a really big challenge that information is not readily available between police services, and I don't really understand why (ERP L9).

Gang intervention work is badged as "Enough is Enough" on the Waltham Forest website, but no respondents mentioned this as a programme name for gang intervention work. The YOS has some access to Child and Adolescence Mental Health Services and Family Functional Therapy which is valued by the team. In terms of pressing issues for the YOS, one worker mentioned safeguarding support from Housing. A respondent said:

Safeguarding is the most important thing from our perspective. Suppose we're saying that these young people have been exploited where a large number of substances have been seized. In that case, there is an implication that they now have a drug debt which puts themselves and their families in danger and we have had cases where families have special measures put in the household. Parents then have to make a really difficult decision to move the whole family to a temporary accommodation (ERH L8).

However, the YOS is seeing more young people who have not previously been known to any services suddenly being arrested and going to court for serious offences. Therefore there appears to be a gap in identifying those most at risk. A respondent said:

Since the pandemic, we are seeing young people committing very serious violent crimes with no history of social care involvement ... now we are seeing kids of 12 years old with no involvement with children's social care before, no previous interventions by the YOS, arrested for attempted murder so there is something clearly coming out of it...(ERP L19).

The provision of housing and social care placements for gang-affected young people re-settling from the secure estate were also identified as service gaps by the same respondent. They said:

When our objectives are not in sync, that can be very frustrating. For example, we have got young people that are serving custodial sentences. Their release dates are decided from the beginning of their sentence so allowing social care to get a placement ready in time (ERH L8).

In 2018 the Metropolitan Police estimated that over 60% of gang members in the capital were involved in drug dealing. Research undertaken by the Mayor of London's office in 2020 estimated that between January 2018 and April 2019, 4,013 young Londoners were involved with County Lines (cited by Pitts 2021). According to MOPAC's self-report study of Young Londoners (2022), 1% claimed to be a gang member.

Figures obtained from Waltham Forest Youth Offending Service indicate they allocated 1361 cases relating to drugs and violence offences following court proceedings between 2017- 2022. Of this total, they flagged 71 children as being gang-involved on recording systems. We were informed that there was a significant overlap between those children flagged for gang and violent offences and those flagged for violence and drug offences. The recorded gang flags by the YOS appear to be low.

The YOS must develop accurate flagging systems for gang-involved or gang-associated young people.

The Youth at Risk Team co-located in the YOS provides outreach work with young people and families. They receive referrals via the Exploitation and Risk Panel, which also receives referrals from the MASH. One respondent explained some of the challenges of multi-agency work. They said:

I would say in terms of the youth offending team they work quite well together, but then you have other agencies involved such as social services, mental health services. Sometimes it can be difficult to communicate and we do have young people that are based in care homes as well so sometimes it can be a run around trying to communicate one thing between so many professionals. In general I would say it works. OK, you may have one or two services that are not very diligent in terms of keeping track of informing other services as to what's really going on, sometimes they don't actually understand the remit of the services that they're trying to load work onto and it doesn't meet that young person's requirements...I would say social services, (ERP L14).

Although partnership work and information sharing were thought to be generally good by agencies, some workers thought thresholds for intervention assessed by the MASH were set too high for social work interventions. Adolescent services for criminal exploitation were said to be mainly provided by the voluntary sector in the Borough. One respondent pointed to some of the strategic deficiencies in the planning of services as a potential problem. They said:

There are some real challenges about how adolescent safeguarding fits into child protection procedures. In that, we still consider child protection procedures for our young people at risk of adolescent CCE. Today those cases still go to a child protection conference. We have a variety of ways of managing them or addressing those risks. They go to a child protection conference (because) Waltham Forest doesn't have a separate adolescent safeguarding service (ERP L9).

This issue could be resolved with locality based Gang Intervention Teams. Moreover, Waltham Forest does have an effective and knowledgeable adolescent safeguarding lead based within Children's Social Care. Their role is to embed a contextual safeguarding approach to extra-familial harm and risk for young people by providing support, case consultation, and guidance to social workers and other front-line practitioners who are working with young people. All referrals to the ERP are screened for extra-familial risk and if necessary, are escalated. Escalation of risk worked well, according to the recent MASH audit.

Some professionals thought that the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) provided interventions for high-risk young people others thought there was too much overlap in coordination roles for neighbourhood safety, community involvement, and voluntary early help for families:

Further clarification of the role of the VRU in differing localities should be sought to enable better inter-agency working.

The allocation of cases at the ERP is often based on existing relationships between clients and services which only sometimes considers matching intensity of support on a multi-agency scaled approach of risk. While the nature of a professional relationship is important the level of specialism to address issues of CCE is also essential. Waltham Forest is developing a preventative screening tool with the backing of the Department of Education (DoE) to assist practitioners in scaling and flagging potential risks from Child Criminal Exploitation and the appropriate allocation of cases. However, this was said to be in an early development stage, and it was not as yet clear who or when this tool would be deployed.

A further review of the services or teams which have the skill-sets and capacity to undertake particular pieces of work to mitigate risk should take place. Adolescent services (both statutory and voluntary) should be deployed in co-located multi-agency agency teams (discussed later in this report).

Safeguarding and Social Work

The primary legislative framework for the welfare and protection of children is the Children Act 1989. Under the Act all those below the age of 18 are 'children', and the child's welfare should be prioritised in decision-making, and relevant services should work in partnership to protect and promote children's welfare. The age range can be extended to 25 if the child has been 'looked after' by the local authority. County Lines involve both children and adults, and collaborative working in and between agencies is therefore crucial. Recently, the remit of local authority Children's Services sections has broadened to encompass non-familial abuse and exploitation. Children's Services interventions will no longer focus just on the home and the family. Now they are charged with intervening in what the National Crime Agency (2017) describes as 'Dangerous Dealer Networks'. In Waltham Forest, the Early Risk Panel assesses all cases, irrespective of the referee's age and, where necessary, refers them to the Serious Violence Panel for further intervention, which is usually enforcement led.

Updated legislation extends the types of harm that fall under the safeguarding umbrella, emphasising the need for effective multi-agency partnerships (Department for Education, 2020). The Children and Social Work Act 2017 also reformed the framework supporting the delivery of multi-agency services to protect and safeguard children, abolishing local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) and introducing the concept of three statutory safeguarding partners — local Government, the police and health services who hold statutory responsibility and must also make arrangements to identify serious child safeguarding cases and commission and oversee local child safeguarding practice reviews where they consider it appropriate to do so. Information exchanges for safeguarding known young people, between agencies, were thought, in the main, to be good. However, some respondents mentioned threshold issues regarding the post-18 offer, saying it took a lot of work to get cases allocated to Adult Social Care teams (see above).

A multi-agency audit of the partnership responses to safeguarding for initial identification of need and risk in October 2022 considered the effectiveness of the Waltham Forest multi-agency safeguarding hub MASH. While the management of the reviewed cases was considered good, it found that sufficient evidence of multi-agency work was not always recorded in the audited files. The report said:

There was clear evidence of multi-agency working throughout the files looked at, although in some areas, issues were present including evidence of drift, poor communication and decisions made in isolation. Two out of six files were rated as good with evidence of regular multi-agency meetings and good multi-agency representation. One of the files required improvement and for the other three files there was insufficient information to rate.

Dacey (2021) points to the fact that 'gangs' were identified as an issue of concern in 14,200 Children in Need cases in 2020, a rise from 10,960 in 2019 (Department for Education, 2021). It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that generally, there is a better recognition by organisations with safeguarding responsibilities of the vulnerabilities of those utilised at the lower levels of drug distribution networks since the early studies of County Lines in England and Wales (Andell & Pitts, 2018; Coomber & Moyle, 2016; Wendle & Briggs, 2015). Respondents in this study confirm that some of these changes have occurred in Waltham Forest. One police officer noted that:

... with child criminal exploitation, a lot of what we have done in the past is honestly and bluntly unfortunate. On some occasions we've arrested people... maybe when we (should have) talked about Child Exploitation, predominantly for under 18's. Now we refer them to the safeguarding unit who sort of manage that risk and well-being (Pol 1).

Numbers often demonstrate shifts in practice. In the recent period the number of referrals of British nationals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive appropriate support, has increased. significantly The Modern Slavery Act (2015) was designed to thwart people trafficking but has more recently been deployed in cases of criminal exploitation in County Lines. Section 45 of the Act provides a defence for individuals who are the victims of human trafficking in relation to the distribution of illicit drugs. Such exploitation is established, or not, by the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Increases in referrals for potential victims to the NRM, rising from 3,266 in 2015 to 12,727 in 2021, may well indicate increased awareness of potential victims of modern slavery, with 31% of referrals in 2021 coming from British nationals and 58% of these for Child Criminal Exploitation (Barlow, 2022). However, many professionals and experts express concern over NRM arrangements. Barlow (2022) in a national study of British nationals as victims of modern slavery, suggests that:

Current civil and criminal justice responses are reductive, linear and tantamount to a secondary victimisation.

Practitioners who have the responsibility for referrals to the mechanism are not necessarily aware of relevant case law pertaining to CCE and Modern Slavery (Gray, 2021). Moreover in Waltham Forest, and elsewhere, NRM assessments to establish “positive grounds” were said by practitioners to take too long. One respondent cited a case taking two years between referral and a “positive grounds” assessment. Other respondents thought that knowledge of the NRM was good amongst middle managers, but this knowledge did not always filter down to the front-line social workers, mainly because of high staff turnover and lack of specific training on social work courses.

Brodie (2023) suggests that contextual safeguarding approaches to safeguarding have highlighted a variety of risks to young people in extra-familial environments like schools, parks, shopping centres, other public spaces, and on-line platforms. These threats may come from peers, partners and adults unconnected to families. In Waltham Forest the contextual safeguarding approach is only occasionally applied. A respondent said:

Regarding our contextual safeguarding approach, I think we have some real gaps with Housing (not) recognising the push factors. I don't think our Housing services are as attuned to the safeguarding concerns as we are (ERP L9).

Brodie (2023) emphasises the need to recognise that a separation of the status of the victim from that of the offender or perpetrator is unhelpful. Instead, young people may be both victims and perpetrators of exploitation or may be associated with exploitation as observers or bystanders. She argues that:

... a shared element across new approaches to safeguarding children and young people is a recognition that practice needs to fit with their developmental pathways and everyday lives. Approaches also emphasise the need to design services to reflect young people's lives, rather than fitting their lives to existing services.

Within a Contextual Safeguarding approach, this means extending definitions of abuse to include forms of child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, teenage relationship abuse, gang affiliation, peer-on-peer sexual and serious youth violence. It will also include addressing the social conditions, and contexts, in which abuse occurs rather than just the individual and family. Suggestions for community-based services are included later in this report.

Although good inductions and on-line materials are available for front-line workers in Waltham Forest, the Borough has a high throughput of front-line staff, and this is particularly the case for social work which means that some shifts in policy and practice were thought not to be reaching the front line. One respondent said:

If you asked any random social worker, they may not be able to talk to it the same way some managers can, so we could be better at how we communicate all of this great work and what it means for practitioners. A lot of planning happens in the strategic groups and we throw that up the ladder and make sure the Chief Executive knows about it but actually, how do we tell the people doing the work because they're the ones doing it day in, day out (ERP L4).

They went on to say:

...we have a high turnover of staff, and if they're at full capacity, we need to wait a few weeks before they can get fully integrated and embedded (with criminal exploitation).

Waltham Forest should provide incentives for social work staff to be retained in the Borough and, adolescent specialists should be deployed to local area Gang Intervention Teams.

Waltham Forest should provide ongoing training on extra-familial safeguarding and CCE as part of certified CPD training for social workers. Future Audits of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs should include a specific themed review of contextual safeguarding and safeguarding young women and girls who may be gang affected.

Brodie (2023) suggests it is essential to recognise the role of gender in the discussion of exploitation and to understand the lived experience of young people. She argues that girls and young women are subject to a sexual double standard, whereby they are viewed as morally corrupt on account of their sexual behaviour (consensual and non-consensual) and blamed for their own abuse and exploitation.

The Intersection of Criminal and Sexual Exploitation

Many of the respondents we spoke to mentioned the intersections of criminal and sexual exploitation, which are sometimes not recognised. One said:

A lot of the women of various ages are victims but not treated like victims. They are forced and coerced to carry stuff whether it's a firearm, or if they are in the same room or building as a partner that's doing this stuff those women are treated differently compared to the white women who might be in the same situation. What I'm seeing in the Asian community is they are coerced into taking the blame by the men in the family they will say, look, if you take the blame, you are gonna get less of a sentence, (NVS 3)

However, it appears that practice in this area is improving. One respondent said:

She saw her exploiter as a boyfriend figure, however, he was always saying, if you do not do this if you do not do that, if you do not meet me then I'm going to circulate this footage (sexual images). He started to get her to deal (drugs). (Previously) I was going into meetings and the police were doing victim blaming... it still goes on, but it's recognised a lot more quickly now (ERP 13)

Other respondents mentioned current exploitation issues. One said:

It was a group of boys that she'd chill with all the time and so she thought they was just like, like her brothers or whatever. And one day she apparently went to one of their houses and they made her do certain things... I think that comes under exploitation because they were giving her this false relationship as friends or whatever and then forced her to do something that she didn't want to do (WFFG 1).

Other respondents spoke about the sharing of sexual images as a means of coercion:

... definitely with the rise of social media and the rise of like video form content and explicit video form content, there are a lot of girls that are being exploited through “benefactors”. Like people that are grooming, people that are older, that are putting them on sites like that and making them do things like that for their own benefits, (WFFG 6).

Others mentioned coerced prostitution:

Sometimes they feel loved, important they see it as a good relationship. We know that they’ve been put up in hotels but looked after so sometimes it can be difficult to identify the exploitation, and linking that with the substance misuse and shame. They can be filmed, they can be recorded and then blackmailed so they are unable to feel that they can talk to anyone. (ERP L12).

Some workers in Waltham Forest, shared concerns regarding the lack of specific focus and uptake on work with young women and girls, one respondent said:

With young women and girls the way in working is different. We had a girls group that was run by my colleagues, the uptake was about 6 girls. I know that there is an offering, there’s something in Walthamstow that has a bigger uptake, but we were trying to offer in schools, small groups of girls that had been identified as potentially needing extra support. Kind of a six week program. But again it didn’t get taken up as far as I’m aware (ERP WF36).

Another said:

In my experience on my caseload the criminal and sexual exploitation of girls has reduced I’m not seeing so much of it, (ERP L13).

Another said:

I actually think that when it comes to young women experience, I think we’re only still seeing the tip of the iceberg, (ERP L4).

Another mentioned that referrals were low but slowly improving:

I know our referrals for for young women and girls have been low and we know that they’re not being identified as quickly sometimes, they can be quite stressed and have debts and things on their head. But I have noticed within the last year that there is more girls coming forward I think because it’s been talked about more openly I feel like there’s been lots more in the media on television you know, (ERP L12).

Policy and practice in social care is usually developed in relation to discrete client groups, such as young men and gangs. When problems normally regarded as pertaining to one area of policy or practice are also experienced by people in another this can cause uncertainty which can, in turn, lead to discriminatory practice.

Waltham Forest commissions work from Abianda, a social enterprise that works with young women and girls affected by criminal exploitation and violence. Abianda also provides training for professionals who work with women and girls. The intervention model is said to be a rights-based approach that provides a safeguarding model, which is helpful to the understanding of the victim/perpetrator overlap. According to Billingshurst and Factor (2023), this unique approach is founded upon the following practice principles:

- Young women are experts on their own lives.
- Young women have innate resources, competence and resilience.
- People affected by a problem are best placed to find the solutions.

- Abianda must shift traditional power hierarchies in service delivery in order to enable young women's participation in solution-building
- Abianda must support young women to have their voices heard in order that they can influence the design and delivery of services.

From respondent comments, the work provided by Abianda is of high value, but further work needs to be undertaken in the Borough to ensure increased referrals and preventative work.

Gangs: Diversification and Illegitimate Governance

The report thus far has commented on recent changes to gang activities in Waltham Forest, indicating greater internal organisation to enable domination of drug distribution. Findings suggest that some dominant gangs are rapidly evolving into organised crime groups with international links to upper-echelon dealers and looser affiliations with lower-level gangs. This section examines the possible diversification in the criminal activities of some gangs.

Varese (2020), argues that organised crime groups are best defined based on activities rather than organisational structure. In his analysis he cites the development of some street gangs that have evolved into organised crime groups with international reach. However, locally, challenges remain in distinguishing what may be an opportunistic crime and what constitutes criminal diversification on the part of dominant Waltham Forest gangs. These possibilities are discussed below.

Some of our respondents reported non-drug-related criminal activity that they thought was associated with criminal exploitation. One said:

We noticed a trail of carjackings involving young people, coming to notice for knifepoint robberies of high-value vehicles or taxi drivers being robbed from. In my professional opinion 12, 13, 14-year-old children don't wake up one night and say we are going to rob a taxi driver or take a car. For me there was concern that that group had been exploited by somebody (ERP 4).

Questions remain about the degree of involvement by dominant gangs in these activities. However, diversification of criminal activities may be occurring and may provide new revenue streams for gangs that are evolving into Organised Crime Groups (OCG's).

Priority 2 of Waltham Forest's Public Service Strategy (2021), Safe neighbourhoods and town centres says:

We will focus on keeping our neighbourhoods and town centres safe. We will introduce measures locally to ensure our high streets are safe spaces for people to shop, to do business and to spend time, and we will be visible in our communities.

Some respondents expressed concern about possible gang activity in local business areas, suggesting that in some cases local businesses were complicit in the illegal activities of gangs. Others thought there was little or no such involvement. We asked Council representatives if they thought any local businesses might be involved in the illegal drugs business. One respondent said:

I would not say no, but not local businesses. Most local businesses are quite engaged with council officers when anti-social behaviour occurs. They do not worry about talking to the police or council officers (LC1).

Respondents from local neighbourhood teams and the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) reported having good relationships with local businesses. They had offered support some of them, particularly

after violent incidents occurred in or near their premises. They said they were using a contextual safeguarding approach. One respondent said:

We've had bits of work we have done. We did work with the local McDonald's franchise because it was becoming a gang hotspot so we did some work with them around signs of exploitation and how they could tackle it. Work is regularly done with the local taxi and hotel firms and things, and we have quite a lot of out-reach street work that happens when an area becomes a hot spot, so they visit regularly (ERP 13).

Building positive working relationships with new community partners can be considered good practice in contextual safeguarding where the education of local businesses plays a vital role (Firmin 2017; Peace 2018; Wilson et al 2023).

One respondent detailed work with business franchises as part of this approach:

There was also a car park that young people were using attached to a supermarket, so we looked at the car park itself, and work was done just to make it a safer space. Things like the gates when locks were broken or clearing up blood or sharp bits of metal.

A respondent described some of the engagement work undertaken with young people:

We went out with the police and our aim was engagement. We spoke to young people, and they told us clearly, we are here because there is nothing else to do, there is nowhere else to go, and it was in the pouring rain, and they were still in this car park just getting soaking.

This work was followed up with interventions involving parents:

So we spoke to all of their parents. We dropped them home, and had a conversation with the parents so we could identify any additional safeguarding concerns. We met with parents and shared our concerns as the local authority and asked how we can all work together (ERP L4).

However, other respondents commented on the involvement of some local franchises of large international businesses in criminal activity, which may warrant a different approach. One said:

If you've ever walked down xxxx, particularly the KFC, there is blatant drug dealings. They know that there is no police there. I've seen it, everybody has seen it, there is no way that KFC is not aware of what is happening, but when I've gone in to speak to them, they're like, "Oh no we don't have the problem. Nope, we don't even want to talk to you". (The staff) live locally. Are you going to want to say anything if they (the drug dealers have) promised that no issues will happen in or outside that shop? You are protected (ERP 16).

Another respondent also mentioned a KFC franchise. They said:

That KFC is so well known they are dealing out the back of it. They are the mafia, and no one touches them (ERP L26).

Another respondent relayed their friend's experience of attempted grooming by a local cafe/restaurant owner. They said:

I had this one friend and recently like, so he was 19 and I only realise its grooming now, but when he was telling me I did not realise. He was working at a restaurant, and he was tired of working at a restaurant like he was done with that, and his boss was like, "There is a guy I know, and I think you would do really good work with him" (FG L2).

One police respondent regarded some local cafes with suspicion. They said:

There are some questionable cafes. How have they got so many people in during the middle of the day, not working, outside smoking shisha all the time? Good question. Don't see many normal customers going there. I can tell you that much (Pol 1).

The officer went on to suggest possible links between local cafes and gangs, however, the nature of this relationship was not clear. They said:

... on our local High Road we've got, a lot of coffee bars ... there was information about a gang getting money off of them so they won't do anything to their businesses, you get that kind of incident or situation happening within my ward. (Pol 1).

Another respondent also mentioned possible extortion and manipulation of local businesses:

I know there was reports of one business who reported that they had tried to say to them you know if you want us to protect your business pay us and they said no and then they came back and smashed their windows I'm pretty sure that's probably not the only business... (ERP 16).

The police respondent was concerned about business premises being utilised as meeting places and for money laundering and expressed the need for follow-up actions needed. They said:

These owners of these cafes, they drink and smoke all day and all night. And the ASB caused by them regarding what they are up to. I cannot do much because I suspect they are dealing on a higher level of Class A drugs and whatnot. So you need a proper surveillance team to keep tabs on people on what is happening because they are also involved in money laundering., (Pol 1).

Concerns about the potential corruption and control of legitimate businesses raises questions about the encroachment of gangs into legitimate local economic life. Grossman (1997) compares criminal organisations to kleptocratic states, the main objective being the maximization of profit through taxation/extortion. These profits are then invested in other activities. Knowledge of gang activities affecting or involving local businesses is currently partial. While there are intimations and some evidence to support the functional diversification of gangs, this needs to be assessed more thoroughly by crime reduction agencies.

Current front-line concerns resulting from organised criminal activities should not be ignored as they provide an entry point to more accurate monitoring and analysis of criminal behaviours. Better links are needed between those who can comprehensively analyse these issues and those who can make intervention decisions. This can be said for other recent developments, the following section examines the sale and use of so-called "party drugs".

Gangs: Diversification and Recreational Drug Use

Members of the Exploitation and Risk Panel (ERP) in Waltham Forest expressed concern regarding recent changes in the markets for illegal drugs. For example, reports of consumption of "designer" cannabis products and pharmaceutical drugs by younger children were mentioned by several respondents:

I don't know how familiar you are with cannabis edibles, but that's a massive change in the trends of young people, and hospital admissions as well. What is happening is they are being laced with all sorts of different things, so people are having reactions that they probably do not expect ... (ERPL2)

Cannabis edibles are divided into 2 types, legal and illegal. CBD edibles are legal in the UK if they contain less than 1mg of THC. THC Edibles are illegal in the UK as THC is classified as a Class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Ask Frank ndg). One respondent said:

Edibles are the latest drug to appear on local markets. They look like a Gummy Bear sweet, but they are laced with a range of drugs, and these have led to several recent hospitalisations. Edibles are probably obtained on-line (ERPL5).

Another said:

They look like a pack of Skittles and are so similar that if you brought them into school, it would be hard to distinguish (ERPL15).

Besides unpredictable or increased dosages and longer-lasting effects of cannabis, some practitioners were concerned that these newer cannabis edibles could be linked to grooming and exploitation:

We also believe edibles are another form that we've seen recently, so edible sweets which contain THC has popped up. Don't know if it's directly linked to exploitation, but I'm guessing it is". (ERPL5).

The Essex Police website (unknown date) appears to be more certain of this link to exploitation and warned that:

Gangs are using edibles as a 'hook' to coerce pre-teenage children into the county lines model.

Moreover, obtaining legal substances by under-age children renders them vulnerable to exploitation, with one respondent suggesting:

Vapes are increasing, and young people are asked to steal them as a test by an older person to establish whether the young person is somebody they would want to involve in County Lines (ERPL5).

One respondent also mentioned sexual exploitation via the use of vapes:

Some girls of, 12 were exchanging sexual favours for vapes. Now vapes are quite big, as are the balloons - gas canisters. Before, it was weed and other things like that, but now there is a transition to new party drugs (ERPL15).

The age, vulnerabilities and manipulation of victims of sexual and criminal exploitation is something the report will return to. For now, the focus is on market changes.

Nitrous oxide, sometimes called Balloons, Laughing Gas or Nos, is not illegal when used for legitimate purposes such as a food additive. Nitrous oxide can produce short bursts of euphoria and uncontrollable laughter (30 seconds to 1 minute). It is taken by inhalation directly from canisters or balloons/plastic bags containing the gas (HM Government 2023). However, the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 (PSA) currently controls non-legitimate nitrous oxide use. This legislation renders the production, supply, and importation legal, but currently possession of nitrous oxide for its psychoactive effects is illegal. Another respondent observed that:

... nitrous oxide has really really taken off. They've gone from using the small little canisters to the the big canisters (that) fill like 40 balloons in one go and you can like literally inflate them straight from the can because it's got a nozzle on the end, whereas the other little ones they had to crack themselves and I think it's a bit time-consuming, and so they have moved on to that (ERP L12).

Other relatively recent trends, both nationally and in Waltham Forest, include the use of Xanax (trade name) by young people. Xanax is a trading name for Alprazolam, a medicine in the benzodiazepine family of drugs which is ten times stronger than the most commonly prescribed benzodiazepines such as Valium. Xanax cannot be obtained on general prescription in the UK and is usually sourced illegally. Xanax is a Class C controlled drug (illegal to possess or supply) and is commonly used to treat anxiety, or as a pain killer. Media claims suggest that children use it to self-medicate (UK Health Security Agency 2018) or to obtain a euphoric high. Commonly called 'Xanax bars', or 'bars' this pharmaceutical drug is sometimes glorified in rap lyrics and is said to have defined a decade in rap music in the US (Hobbs, 2019). A local respondent said:

New drugs are appearing. Xanax is becoming more prevalent and Xanax has led to hospital admissions locally (ERPL5).

Other child care professionals raised similar concerns about the use of Xanax but thought supply was sourced from neighbouring boroughs:

What we have seen is the use of Xanax amongst young people which we first saw a year to 18 months ago. And it was linked to young people rapidly losing weight and not attending to their hygiene; not attending school (ERPL3).

The UK Health Security Agency (2018) suggests that hospital admission data in England indicates that there has been an increase in the number of people aged under 20 admitted to hospital with benzodiazepine poisoning and the treatment of alprazolam poisoning have increased substantially. Public Health England has examined UK police seizure data for drugs which also showed increases in seizures from fewer than ten in 2016 to over 800 in 2017 (op cit). Many of the Xanax tablets available are thought to be counterfeit. This raises concerns because these products may contain varying amounts of Alprazolam, making it difficult for drug users to decide how much to take. Counterfeit Xanax has also been shown to sometimes contain potentially dangerous adulterants. Xanax tablets are not usually prescribed and are usually bought from street-level drug markets and are also available from illegal websites and social media apps. According to Marsh (2018), reporting in the Guardian newspaper, the UK makes up 22% of global sales of Xanax on the dark web and this scale of sales ranks the UK as the second largest untraceable web market for this drug globally. Speaking to the BBC in 2017, Inspector Peter Sparrow from Wiltshire Police, said:

The quantities we're hearing are being used are such that you can't be just reselling stuff that's been prescribed to mum or dad, so this is only going to be sourced through the Internet...You would have to go through the dark web, which obviously raises further concerns, because you don't actually know what it is they're buying." (Smith-Walters BBC 2017).

From these accounts it appears that the demand for some drugs is linked to popular culture, and local organised crime groups are quick to capitalise and boost demand through increased supply. Further indications of this form of market exploitation were expressed by respondents who discussed "Lean", which has also become popular as a result of its use in American rap lyrics. According to "Talk to Frank", a Government sponsored information resource:

Lean in America normally means a cough syrup that contains codeine and antihistamine mixed with a soft drink. You cannot buy that cough syrup in the UK so what people call "lean" over here changes depending on what's been used.

One respondent in Waltham Forest said:

Lean is a new one it's codeine and promethazine mixed together and then mix that with a fizzy drink like Sprite, and they tend to drink that in two-litre bottles. They share it around amongst friends, but they have no idea of how easy it is to overdose on something like codeine (ERP 12)

Another of our respondents discussed a link between Lean and local organised crime gangs:

We had the main person, the controller, under surveillance (with) ... a football size wrap, but he also had thousands and thousands of packets of paracetamol stolen from warehouses for making Lean it must have been from a warehouse because he had another flat that we connected him with that was absolutely filled. They are not just the local urban street gang, these are organised criminals making a hell of a lot of money (ESOC 2).

HM Governments Drug Plan (2021) highlights the need for a focus on illegal substances that emphasises activities aimed at protecting vulnerable children and young people. **Having noted practitioners concerns it would appear that supply and demand for Vapes, Xanax, Nitrous Oxide, Cannabis Gummies and Lean for younger people is an issue requiring further attention from the relevant partnerships in Waltham Forest, not at least because of their association with the increased exploitation of vulnerable young people through dependency and debt.**

Gangs: and Darknet Markets

Darknet markets are on-line platforms where various illegal goods, including drugs, are bought and sold using cryptocurrencies. The use of cryptocurrencies in illegal drug markets, has gained attention in recent years. These markets operate on the darknet, a part of the Internet that requires specific software to access and offers users anonymity.

Cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin, have become the preferred form of payment in darknet markets due to their pseudonymous nature. Bitcoin transactions are recorded on a public ledger called the blockchain, but the identities of the individuals involved are only sometimes readily traceable. These markets use encryption and other technologies to facilitate anonymous transactions, and the landscape of darknet markets can change rapidly, making sustained enforcement challenging. The best-known darknet market was Silk Road, which was shut down by law enforcement in 2013, but new marketplaces have since emerged in its place (Barratt, 2012; Martin, 2013; Van Buskirk et al., 2014; Aldridge & Décary-Héту, 2016; Demant et al., 2018). Recent studies suggest the dark web operates on the transnational level of production and supply as well as locally in end-user markets (Di Nicola et al., 2015; Koenraadt, 2018; Hall & Antonopoulos, 2016). Demant et al. (2020) argue that social media markets demonstrate an integral but demarcated part of existing drug markets, suggesting that social media markets are tightly integrated with other types of drug markets but have had the effect of making these markets more fluid and reactive but still form an essential part of the drug trade.

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2019) estimates that UK-based Organised Crime Groups generate more money from selling illegal drugs on the darknet than any other European country (£24m. with a total weight of 2,825kg in 2017-18). Moreover, it is estimated that the number of people in England who buy drugs on the dark web has more than doubled since 2014. These shifts have also come to the attention of practitioners concerned with exploitation in Waltham Forest, one ERP member mentioned:

There have been reports of young people receiving kinds of packages and parents not knowing what they are or where they're coming from and how much of an increase to pre COVID I'm not too sure, I have not seen the data to look at that, but anecdotally, it certainly feels like there was a bit of a shift (ERPL4).

Another, when speaking about cannabis gummies, said:

Yeah, they're being sold from the Internet they're not getting them from a dealer as such it's more like the dark web, Instagram, Snapchat also they'll be able to order these things but lots of young people don't have credit cards so how do they?...sometimes higher-level gang members are ordering these, but getting it delivered to the young person's address, (ERP L9)

Some young people spoke about failed attempts to make an income from technologically enabled transactions in laundering money:

I had a boy that I met just after lockdown and I went on his Snap, and I saw he was like one of those people that try to make money. I was like, oh, you know what, let me do it. I have never done it, let me do it. Long story short, it was bad, and then the outcome is I nearly got my whole bank locked off, Halifax. But they banned me and everything, and then I got lucky cause I didn't, and it didn't go further (YPFG S4).

The levels of sophistication required to operate in crypto-markets divided options on levels of organisation involved in purchasing drugs from crypto markets. There was evidence that individuals used this method for self-supply. A respondent said:

We see more predominantly young girls and women using Xanax, Valium or diazepam to manage mood issues, anxiety, self-harm, thoughts of suicide depression and again, this is all being bought off of the Internet and Snapchat and a lot of them are very clued up on how to purchase these things (ERP L9).

But another said:

I think for cannabis, those young people are so addicted they never got time to wait for a delivery, it's just they want it instantly, you know and it's a little 5 pound 10 pounds, yeah little amounts, most of them don't have cards that you can use on-line (ERP L16).

The middle market is an uncertain term. It may describe the quantity of illegal drugs being dealt with, which may be from ounces to kilos. It is usually the level below the importers, however, crypto-markets can be used for personal or commercial supply. Some respondents commented on sophisticated changes to money laundering practices from drug proceeds. This, again may indicate new levels of organisation regarding gangs and technology. One respondent said:

they're doing it a lot more with the cryptocurrency in the cyber currency because they say this is a potential switching over to that to avoid laundering rules (Pol 3).

The social media markets for drugs can be perceived as continuing existing pathways into drug selling. However, it is important to stress that because more amateur and professional sellers can be seen operating side by side, amateur sellers may be tempted to move into more large-scale retail operations (Demant, et al 2020).

Given that gangs have a near monopoly on all drugs sold in Waltham Forest and that some of the recipients of drug packages via the Royal Mail and other couriers are children, this raises additional concerns about the young people's lack of awareness of their role in larger drug distribution networks. A respondent told us:

Crystal Meth has recently been posted to a young person from the USA (ERPL5).

Some young people may take the opportunity of “easy money” through franchising arrangements with longer established gangs, utilising gang names as permitted brand names to sell newer and arguably more dangerous drugs priced at a more accessible wholesale cost. A police respondent drew our attention to recent developments and subsequent interventions. They said:

Regarding the crystal meth consignment intercepted at Heathrow from our Gang members, I think they are Albanian Brothers. They clubbed together to buy £40K worth and I think the street value was £140,000 (Pol 3).

It should be stated that methamphetamine use in the UK is limited and is currently viewed as a niche drug more popular in the US, Scandinavia and other parts of Europe. However, it remains a substance that should be closely monitored (EMCDDA 2023), particularly regarding how a slow supply-led market can increase market demands, as seen with other stimulant drugs such as crack cocaine.

Despite multi-agency efforts, the organisational embeddedness and activities of some street gangs in Waltham Forest have evolved further. This evolution includes the diversification of wholesaling drugs and distribution practices enabled through on-line markets. This market includes party drugs which appeal to a younger segment of the market, and arguably, a market testing of more dangerous “newer” psychoactive substances, such as methamphetamine, which is beginning to emerge in the UK.

Dame Carol Black’s Report, Part 1 (2020) suggests that the illicit drugs market in the UK is worth almost £10 billion a year, with 3 million users and an increasingly violent and exploitative supply chain. The current UK Drugs Action Plan (2021) notes the promise of increased recruitment and investment in addressing the “Middle Market” and County Lines. Even with the possibility of under-recording, the Action Plan estimates 1,716 OCGs that supply drugs in the UK. This supply chain stretches from the global to the local, with “successful” street gangs now establishing themselves as what has been termed “Local Organised Crime Groups” (Andell, 2019).

Gangs: Analyzing the Links with Organised Crime

Despite the challenges from ‘Austerity’ cutbacks, the Metropolitan police has done some excellent work disrupting organised crime networks. Since 2018, a project to disrupt OCGs has resulted in 261 vehicles, 743 kg of drugs and 15 firearms confiscated, and £2.4m in cash recovered. The number of people charged with a drug trafficking offence up to March 2023 had risen by 31 per cent to 6,784, compared to the previous 12-month period. However, some gaps remain in targeting dominant gangs at the cusp of organised crime. The Government’s Organised Crime Strategy (2013) separates gangs and Organised Crime Groups but recognises that gangs can evolve to become an organised crime group. It reports:

We make a distinction between organised crime groups and urban street gangs. The differences are primarily about the level of criminality, organisation, planning and control. Nevertheless, there are connections between gangs and organised crime: urban gang members may engage in street drug dealing on behalf of organised criminals, and some gangs aspire to and may become organised crime groups in their own right.

This challenges partnership work in correctly identifying and acting against gangs transitioning towards organised crime as different interventions may be required. This report has examined the changing nature of the organisation and activities of some of the dominant gangs in Waltham Forest and has suggested behaviours akin to organised crime groups.

Some of the difficulties in distinguishing gang behaviour and activities of organised crime is that they often overlap, and behaviours are dynamic and flexible. One Police Officer summarised gang organisation in Waltham Forest and suggested little information is shared about the activities of dominant gang elders:

At the bottom the 11 to 14/15-year-olds the sales rep. The next level up is the 14 to 17-year-olds, the enforcers, the muscle the ones who are controlling the base using violence to maintain the hierarchy, then the following two tiers, who are the senior soldiers and Elders, and that's where it is sort of cuts off. (POL3).

There are probably good reasons why high level intelligence is not available at a local level although several respondents appeared to be aware that dominant gangs in Waltham Forest were linked directly with international supply chains. The international aspects of drug supply are beyond the remit of the current research. However, respondents indicated that filling some of these knowledge gaps would help identify gangs transitioning into OCGs and hence, relevant interventions. The above respondent went on to say:

What I do know is that ... those top 2 tiers of the Premier League don't feature on a street-level at all, the 'names', these Robin Hood-type figures are not seen. (Having been involved for many years) they know who to go to and be trusted by the bulk importers of the drugs. (POL3).

Another respondent involved in enforcement said:

We know skunk is cultivated within the UK. The majority of heroin, crack and Class A drugs are still coming in from abroad, so because they have those links and the trust by the upper echelons of the Gang world, they can buy in bulk, wholesale level. You are talking about serious organised crime. (ESOC 2).

One problem in identifying groups developing into OCGs could be the language used by professionals. For example, categorisations of Urban Street Gangs, Drug Networks and Serious Organised Crime Groups etc. in intelligence gathering are often confusing (Sergi 2017, Andell 2019). In some of the interviews with enforcement respondents, there appeared to be some confusion about activities which constituted youthful ASB, gang activity and organised crime. This affects what is recorded, how the subjects are assessed in terms of the seriousness of their offending and dangerousness of their behaviour and which resources should be deployed to prevent their activities. One respondent, experienced in providing, analysing and acting on intelligence expressed their frustrations regarding the use of terms. They said:

Well, this is the big question. Everyone records it differently. Going to the Mali Boys in London, there is a large portion of Mali Boy members, but what proportion of them are not actually part of that gang? You have the Urban street gangs, which might be a group of nuisance youths. You get the Urban Street Gangs and the OCG'S and forces trying to differentiate between them, trying to say organised crime groups, and these people are not really. Urban Street Gangs are lower-level on the street, trying to identify themselves as a gang in that postcode. However, it gets muddy because we spoke a lot about the controllers of those lines and those coordinating everything. We lose it when it gets there. Then the next level up from that, in between the OCG and the Urban Street Gang, because they supply the Urban Street Gang, they will be thought of as the Urban Street Gang but are the higher levels and organised. The OCGs are not there. It's a big disconnect, and some forces are recording OCGs that include street gangs, and some forces keep them separate. So the actual picture of how many OCG's you have got nationally is entirely skewed. We cannot differentiate. So you are going into some forces going, and you're an urban street gang, you're an OCG and some forces don't want lots of OCG's on their books. It means all different things for people, plans and everything else to tackle those OCG's around it. Definitions are a hard one. How do you define the difference between them?

In addressing the upper levels of drug market segmentation through enforcement, correct information needs to be shared with appropriate agencies and units. The London region does not have a Regional Organised Crime Unit, which interfaces between Waltham Forest and the National Crime Agency (NCA). Instead, in London, each force maintains its own set of specialist capabilities to tackle organised crime and comments noted previously suggest fewer resources for Waltham Forest due to recent reorganisations. The joint unit above BCU's in London to assess the threats of serious organised crime is the Regional Organised Crime Threat Assessment (ROCTA) unit.

A recent HMI report (2023) examined responses to Serious Organised Crime by the Metropolitan Police. It said:

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) should improve the way it records and assesses threats from organised crime. The MPS should ensure all basic command units (BCUs) identify and assess all serious and organised crime (SOC) threats.

It went on to mention that currently, due to capacity issues, the Met's process to assess SOC stipulated that BCUs should only refer threats for assessment if they require specialist support. These omissions suggest the potential for a disconnect between recording, analysis and actions taken.

The HMI report (2023) also commented on the analytic capacity of the ROCTA and said:

It is difficult for the forces in the London region to retain specialist staff such as financial investigators and analysts.

The report also highlighted that the Metropolitan Police had 60 vacant financial investigator posts which was particularly acute for hubs meant to address serious organised crime. It reported:

In one of the force's operational hubs focusing on organised crime, there should be 50 financial investigators; we found only 8 were in post. Some economic crime teams perceived that they were unable to dedicate enough time to serious and organised crime investigations...

More generally, the report indicated that:

The force had 40 analyst posts that were vacant. It should have 228 analysts across the force. Operational staff reported difficulties in securing analytical support to present complex evidence for court. In some cases, investigators attempted to complete this work themselves without the requisite expertise.

This deficit was echoed by a respondent from HMRC who examines organised crime nationally concerning revenue avoidance. They spoke about the lack of analytical capacity and said:

We have a couple on branch that are trained, people that have put their head above the parapet and got trained in addition to their day job. Some actual financial investigators can be appointed. However, you rarely see them on our branch. We've got analysts, et cetera. They are just quite a rare commodity and are pretty sought after. So to get one appointed to your case is quite rare (RC 1).

This identified deficit in analytical capacity suggests that potentially valuable intelligence which connects individuals to a context could be missed, which could affect the upstreaming of investigations and thereby reduce risks to vulnerable people. Clearly, increased resources are needed for further development of analytical work, and the new 10-year Drug Action Plan (2021) has promised additional resources for this area of work. However, respondent comments suggest that additional resources are yet to materialise.

In the absence of additional analytical resources across London or in the Borough of Waltham Forest, training should be given regarding the conceptual frameworks of gangs, local organised crime and organised crime groups.

At the lower levels of gang exploitation, locally in Waltham Forest, one strategic manager expressed concerns regarding the analytic capacity to fully assess the broader strategic picture of risks to young people affected by gangs. Until recently, this facility was said to have been very good. However, they also mentioned it depended on too few people and thought this was a future threat. They reported that:

We have got an analyst who has provided this at the moment but he is leaving us very shortly, so I'm quite aware that for me, it is a bit of a vulnerability. I'm not sure that I'm confident that the other analysts and the team can do it and provide it at the same level. We've got used to some really good data, but we have a bit of a vulnerability in that it's based on a person, not necessarily a process (EHR L13).

An analyst we spoke with confirmed this threat when they discussed assessing current child exploitation risks. They said:

At the moment, to be completely frank with you, our resources are rather limited, and that becomes the problem when young people are under our radar sometimes because they do something that clearly states that they need some support, some help and sometimes it is too late already (ERP L19).

The deficit of crime analysts based within the local authority should be addressed in Waltham Forest. Co-learning between practitioners, policymakers and analysts should be facilitated to ensure a systematic analytical capability is continuously applied to ensure greater uniformity of system recording and enable further future monitoring of changes in risk.

Gangs: Middle Markets and the Jointing the Dots.

UK Criminological research has produced a significant body of work which suggests an increasing range of differentiated market arrangements that facilitate the supply of illicit drugs (Aktah & South, 2000; Aldridge et al, 2012; Bennett & Holloway, 2004; Coomber, 2006; Dorn et al, 1992; Dorn & South, 1990; Densely et al. 2018, May & Hough 2002, Matrix Knowledge Group 2007, Parker, 2001; Parker & Measham, 1994; Ruggiero, 2006; Seddon, 2006). Most of these studies agree that drug markets are heterogeneous. These differences usually focus on organisational structure (Hough & May, 2004), the geographical sphere of operation (Coomber, 2017), the level of market segmentation (Pearson & Hobbs, 2002) and the utilisation of technology (Aldridge et al., 2017).

A convenient functional "tripartite" model is often utilised by enforcement agencies to demarcate international, regional and local market divisions of labour, which assists in managing risks and resources (Chin, 2009). However, Sergi (2017) indicates that it is likely that this tripartite model is imperfect and cannot encompass all of the characteristics of any one particular case. In Waltham Forest, elements of the model which were once common are now subject to change, and much of this change is in what may be termed the middle market. She argues:

Whether a group is local, national or international obviously affects policing responses because location/geography combined with the level of sophistication of the group will weigh differently on risk and harm assessments to determine the seriousness of the threat. In the local dimension, organised crime groups and gangs may overlap.

HM Government's 10-year Drug Action Plan, From Harm to Hope (2021), focuses on upstreaming and interventions in the "middle market". Illegal drug markets can be segmented based on the types of drugs traded, the amounts traded and the reputation of a reliable product. Arguably, the emergence of County lines drug dealing has assisted in embedding a new type of "middle market" in the UK drugs business (Andell, 2019).

One of our respondents said:

It's quite common for an importer outside of the UK to arrange for a consignment to come across, usually somewhere around the metric ton mark, and that would be in the back of a lorry, and then the middle marketeers would contact that importer or be contacted by that importer to go to a deposit site, a lay-by off-loading straight into a vehicle then go to what would be referred to as a slaughterhouse, where they will take the load, they will cut it all up into smaller deals to the middle market and then couriers will go and collect. That's how that system usually works.

Another respondent echoed this:

So importation and middle market are sometimes the same, so they can occasionally be that, but it all depends on the makeup of the OCG (ESOC 1).

The challenges involved in understanding the dimensions of organised crime and the subsequent fragmentation of responses means that gangs are usually dealt with locally as they are usually considered more chaotic than organised crime groups.

However, respondents agreed that there are direct connections at international and regional levels of drug market activity but classify these actions as beyond gang activity. A respondent said:

Difference between a gang and an OCG, is the OCG being the group that are actually conducting the importation, gang being the ones who are their end market. There is a middle market though, where you do get people bridging the gap between gang and organised crime groups, and it's almost the elders of that gang, almost a graduate who has put a foot in that world. It tends to be those that have stayed in the game longer they come to prominence within a gang and then, as an elder, tend to make that bridge between the gangs and the organised crime groups, and I find it rare that I see those people who graduated to that level stepping into pure organised crime. They always seem to have some affiliation with a gang. And they tend to stay within that post. They don't tend to evolve past that (ESOC 1).

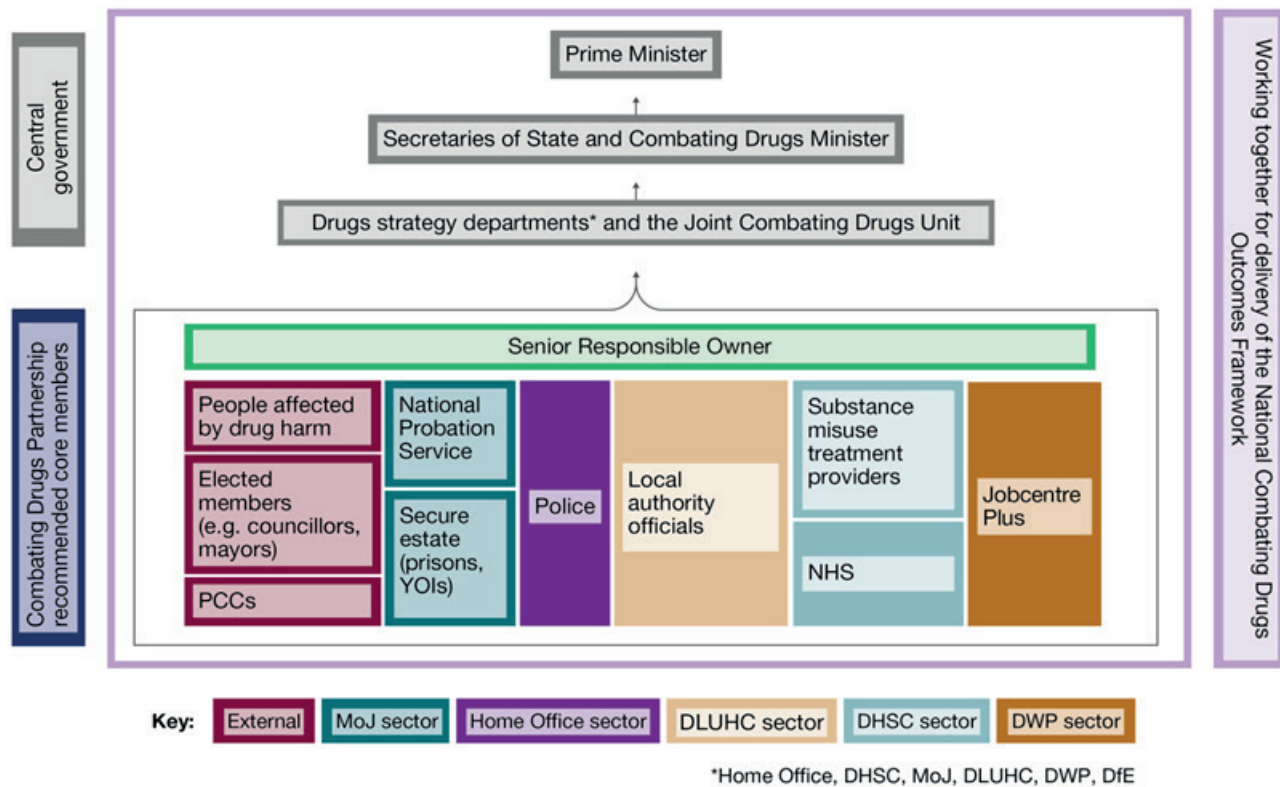
Understanding gang-operated drug lines as part of a middle market is a parochial interpretation, given the widespread recognition of drug supply as a global business. However, it allows us to explore the organisation and links between illegal drug wholesale and retail distribution as "local organised crime" (Andell, 2019). Analysing the activities of dominant gangs as "local organised crime" may allow for better local strategic planning, which considers Government policy imperatives in organised crime and drugs.

A recent HMI Report on the Metropolitan Police and their response to Organised Crime (2023) recommended that:

We encourage the force to develop partnership data and intelligence to enrich these profiles and to communicate SOC-related harm in the local community. The force should develop a 4P approach with relevant partners to tackle this harm and reduce community vulnerability.

Moreover, Waltham Forest also needs to respond to the Government 10 year Drug Action Plan which requires the initiation of a Combatting Drugs Partnership. The following figure (Fig. 7) gives an overview of the partnership requirements.

Figure 7. Combatting Drugs Partnership



Breaking the Drug Supply Chain is 1 of 3 strategic objectives for the 10-Year Drugs Action Plan, and this Objective sits with the Home Office and MOJ. The objective sets out to make the UK significantly harder for Organised Crime Groups to operate by:

- restricting upstream flow
- securing the border
- targeting the wholesale 'middle market.'
- going after the money
- rolling up county lines
- tackling the retail market
- restricting the supply of drugs into prisons

From national objectives local targets for Waltham Forest will follow. Other national objectives relate to drug treatment and recovery and attitudinal change to the acceptability of drugs. These objectives impact on local and national drug markets but lie outside of the current remit of this research.

Objectives in serious organised crime utilise a 4P's system of Pursue, Prevent, Protect and Prepare (2013) and the Drugs 10-year Action Plan is based on supply and demand reduction, which can be thought about as themes of Enforcement, Situational Prevention, Social Prevention and Community Development (Andell & McManus, 2002). The following tool may assist local strategists and policy planners in thinking about some of the overlaps of policy imperatives when deciding on appropriate ways to structure a comprehensive gang strategy.

Figure 8. Strategic Tool for Policy Cross-cutting in Organised Crime, Drug Market Harm Reduction and Gangs.

4 Ps Model	Community Harm Reduction Model for Drug Markets	Themes for Gang Interventions
Pursue	Enforcement	Intelligence; Targeted enforcement
Prevent	Situational Prevention	Neighbourhood policing; CCTV; Neighbourhood design; NOMS monitoring; Housing; Civil Orders.
Protect	Social Prevention	Early help; Youth and social work; YOS; Gang exit; Drug Treatment; CAMs; Through and Aftercare; VRU case work.
Prepare	Community Development	Youth and Community work; VRU Business and Community Meetings. Councillor drop ins and local meetings.

It is important to recognise that within multi-agency work, thematic work should be targeted towards particular neighbourhoods to maximise impact and avoid a scatter-gun approach. Despite the challenges outlined above, Waltham Forest Community Safety and Drugs partnerships have opportunities to reduce harm from criminal exploitation.

Strategic Responses to Exploitation from Gangs

The governance structure in Waltham Forest (Figure 9 below) at the time of writing was under review.

Figure 9. Strategic Partnerships.



Although the fundamental ‘partnership’ principles of sharing information and making common assessments hold true, the current developments of gang embeddedness, the development of local organised crime groups affecting other parts of the UK as well as the social, political, and economic conditions which to a large extent dictate responses in Waltham Forest may now be significantly different to the context in which many of the partnerships and interventions were established. To address this, recent revisions to Community Safety partnership work in Waltham Forest have taken place primarily around the governance of multi-agency subgroups.

The Community Safety partnership is, known as SafetyNet, aims to reduce anti-social behaviour, gang crime, violence against women and girls, youth and re-offending, and substance misuse. (LBWF 2022). A gangs program is currently in existence and a comprehensive gangs strategy is currently in development. Moreover, although Safety Net has a responsibility for substance misuse, at the time of writing it is believed that the structures and subgroups for the new Combatting Drugs Partnership were also in development.

As mentioned above these developing strategies and structures need to chime with both local conditions and Government imperatives and the attached tool above may assist this process. With regard to a comprehensive Gangs Strategy Thrasher (1929) famously once said, “no two gangs are alike”. Therefore this requires a broad central strategy with local planning and delivery.

The work of Safety Net is facilitated through its partnership board which works in conjunction with the Safeguarding Children’s Board and Safeguarding Adults Board, who report upwards to the Strategic Partnership Executive. Duties of the SafetyNet board include:

- Commissioning the Waltham Forest Strategic Assessment in response to existing and emerging crime threats and challenges
- Refreshing SafetyNet’s strategic objectives and priorities annually to ensure resources are deployed effectively
- Quarterly meetings to review the performance of partners delivering the SafetyNet action plan.

A Crime and Disorder Needs Assessment was reported to be in preparation at the time of writing. Any needs assessment is a dynamic process, and this report will add a detailed analysis of criminal exploitation and gangs to a dynamic evaluation. SafetyNet consists of four multi-agency subgroups, which are accountable to the board. Their individual terms of reference govern the board and each subgroup. Each delivers a strategic priority action plan on behalf of the board.

These four subgroups are:

1. Violence against women and girls (VAWG)
2. Gangs and youth violence
3. Anti-social behaviour
4. Prevent

Good governance by the SafetyNet board requires open scrutiny and elected councillors perform this role via Scrutiny Committees and by young people via Independent Advisory Groups. Practitioners and policymakers agreed that youth scrutiny in Waltham Forest is excellent and undertaken in the main through the YIAG. However, at the time of writing, some councillors mentioned that improvements for scrutiny by Councillors were required. One said:

See, that’s another thing scrutiny, a lot of the stuff that happens in the council is tick box. So the officers come. Present their report. The councillors ask a few questions and off they go. I don’t think that’s solving anything. You’re just passing information around. That’s all you’re doing, (WFC2)

Another Councillor agreed that there are some gaps in scrutiny and suggested further training was needed:

I think scrutiny is a problem. There's actually no formal training in laws, duties and mechanisms in structures like there's no real proper legal training that's given in understanding the acts, and I think that is a big issue actually as well so if you don't know your powers of scrutiny and that's the problem (WFC1).

Scrutiny training for Councillors in issues pertaining to community safety should be considered by the Safety Net Board.

Developing a Comprehensive Gangs Strategy

We recommend that a Waltham Forest Multi-agency Gang Strategy pursue three clear and interrelated aims because the proliferation of aims and objectives risks blurring the focus of the strategy which, in turn, could lead to 'mission drift'.

Thus the Aims of the strategy would be:

1. To stop gang-related grooming and violence in sexual & criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable people involved in the trafficking of drugs.
2. To disrupt and re-shape the illicit drug distribution networks which utilise vulnerable children and young people.
3. To neutralise the impact of County Lines trafficking drugs in and from Waltham Forest.

The component themes of a Comprehensive Gangs Strategy would be:

1. Signalling

The report mentions incidents of violence and the potential manipulation of the business community. Slovic (1992) and Innes & Fielding (2002) describe these events as signal crimes. If a signal event is not met by a robust official response, potential perpetrators may conclude that there is a diminished risk of apprehension and the signal event may become the cause of an escalation in the seriousness of these crimes. The approach of the Home Office, (Cullen et al, 2016) suggests that a strong message is sent to those exploiting children (possibly via digital media) forbidding the use of children and vulnerable adults for drug dealing. The messaging would inform the groups involved that breaking this 'rule' will lead to intensive multi-agency enforcement activity against ALL members of the group for ALL offences committed. This would entail engaging affected communities to explain the approach and would ensure that the first group to break the 'rule' is subjected to a tough response as promised.

2. Safeguarding Gang Involved and Gang Affected Young and Vulnerable People

For young people in gang affected neighbourhoods the danger is primarily on the street not in the home. Some of them recognise what is happening to them as abuse but many don't, and see their involvement as unavoidable but in some way freely chosen. Many fear or mistrust the police and the 'authorities' and these young people are 'hard to reach'. We can only understand who is at risk, and in what ways, when we have a picture of the social/criminal networks (the social fields) in which they are enmeshed. The people who can help us do this are the affected young people and their families. Therefore the context of community and neighbourhood is vital to the success of any interventions. 'Contextual safeguarding' responds to young people's experiences of harm outside of the home with peers, in schools and in the neighbourhood. The relationships young

people form in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can involve violence and abuse, over which parents and carers have little influence. Child and adolescent safeguarding professionals therefore, need to engage with these extra-familial contexts, recognising that the assessment of, and intervention in, these places are a critical part of safeguarding practice. Schools and educational settings, for example, need to consider the location and culture of their school or college and assess the risks to which young people may be exposed both inside and outside the school or college community.

3. Contextual/Neighbourhood Policing

A contextual policing response would target the night-time economy, hotels, taxi firms and the 'take-aways' where young people may be exploited. These locations and workers in these businesses are ideally placed to identify child and adolescent exploitation and raise the alarm. Businesses that may be involved in gang related activities may need specialist regional interventions. Youth clubs, parks, stairwells, schools, peer groups, disused garages and houses have repeatedly featured in CCE problem profiles. A contextual response fits within wider policing culture in terms of the 'offender, victim, location' triangle used when investigating and intervening in crime.

4. Embedded Interventions.

Effective interventions with gang-involved young people tend to be based on trusting, relationships developed over time (Crimmens et al, 2004, Pitts, 2008). Despite the cuts, many gang affected neighbourhoods still have youth serving agencies and community groups some of which have this quality of contact. Examples of good practice are given below. US and UK research suggests that these groupings can provide the basis for a consortium of youth serving agencies and organisations in gang-affected neighbourhoods. These consortia, supported by professionals with expertise in capacity building, community organisation and community development can assess the nature and dimensions of the gang problem and work with local community groups and agencies to establish which aspects of the problem they are best equipped to deal with. The professionals can then identify gaps and endeavour to fill them.

5. Targeted Local Interventions for Local Organised Crime.

Disruption is thought to be the most effective intervention for organised crime. This usually means targeting assets. Comprehensive disruption strategies are largely beyond the scope of the current study and multi-agency interventions are devised at the Serious Violence Panel and at Police Strategic meetings on Organised Crime. The report has briefly discussed the specialist resources needed for intelligence gathering and enforcement tactics, has mentioned the paucity of resources available and has made some recommendations to assist this work. However, disruptions can also take place with the young people who exploit others but are exploited themselves. These disruptions can be carried out through the application of civil orders. A variety of civil orders are available which can restrict activities in specified areas of groups or individuals, which in effect can make human resources "too hot to handle" for potential exploiters. When applied post-conviction to exploiters they can also reduce the cultural capital of individuals or impact on street kudos by replacing the conferred label of a "drug dealer" with that of a "modern slaver". Civil orders should be subject to regular review and can assist in preventative or rehabilitation plans, subject to agreed behaviours. A full report of County Lines in National Offender Management, including the use of civil orders, is forthcoming as part of the project.

Evidence Led Responses Building on Existing Work.

Research from the UK and the US has informed best practice and suggest gang strategies which successfully involve local community representatives, professionals and residents of gang-affected communities (Andell & Pitts, 2018). Successful strategies are characterised by a combination of suppression, social intervention, organisational development and the provision of social opportunities (see harm reduction tool above).

Spergel and Grossman (1998) compared outcomes for 195 program youths', who received some services and 208 youths who received no services. Findings are echoed in a meta-analysis of nine studies of interventions in gang-related crime and anti-social behaviour in England undertaken by the SSRU (2009). They found that integrated interventions had a positive effect in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour compared to the more usual, 'siloed', service provision if they included:

- Community involvement in the planning of interventions
- Community involvement in the delivery of interventions
- Expertise shared between agencies.
- Case management/provision that was personalised to individual offenders
- Delivery of incentives to gang members to change offending behaviour as part of a wider comprehensive intervention approach; for example, educational opportunities, financial assistance, and recreational activities.

Thematic work planned centrally through Safety Net and its subgroups must be targeted and delivered locally and involve local communities. Managers and Councillors mentioned the possibilities of more localised and focused area initiatives through the development of Youth Hubs. One senior manager said:

I'd really like to have a community space somewhere where parents can go and get some skills in working, but families can get some food that's cheap enough so they can afford to eat together because I think the gangs have opportunities to exploit our kids because the families aren't able to sit down and build those connections. I think that piece of work would be more effective than the sticking plasters we put in at the late stages so some community development work to build a safe space where people could come together, (ERP L15).

As mentioned earlier in the report, the establishment of co-located professionals forming a multi-agency gangs intervention team should be part of a comprehensive gangs strategy.

We therefore recommend that a dedicated Gang Intervention Team is developed.

Recruitment:

Team members may be seconded from relevant agencies, interviewed and selected based on their understanding and commitment to the task, their track record of engagement with hard-to-reach young people, and their capacity to effect change in their lives and situation.

Leadership:

The professional with lead responsibility for this team should bring experience in, and knowledge of, the range of agencies deemed to be relevant partners and, in particular, an understanding of their cultures, structures, discourses and priorities. S/he would be able to challenge single agency decisions if it is felt that they do not reflect the overall objectives of the Gang Strategy.

Funding:

The funding for this group should be ring-fenced and incentives should be provided to ensure that team members are prepared to make a minimum two-year commitment to the team.

Localisation of Targeted Work and Youth Hubs

Some consultations have taken place for a pilot for a Youth Hub in Waltham Forest. A Youth Hub is a safe space for young people used to find employment or, training opportunities and access or return to education. Hubs usually provide financial services to help with budgeting and services to support mental and emotional well-being. Hubs are a localised means of delivering both universal and targeted youth and community services. They sometimes share spaces with partners, including colleges, charities, training providers and councils. This means people can access a range of services in one location.

In Waltham Forest, it was suggested that following an evaluation, and subject to agreements, a further two Hubs may be considered. Practitioners were in the main enthusiastic about locality work through youth hubs. Local best practice by the voluntary sector was said to inform potential models but there needed to be more clarity about sustainable funding for the proposed projects.

During the project we have identified funding opportunities for youth initiatives in Waltham Forest and pointed to additional resources that are likely to become available through the government's Drugs Action Plan. Local authorities, in collaboration with the third sector partners, have, in other areas, developed gang desistance programmes which could be delivered locally. Previous research has indicated a useful model for localised gang work (Pitts, 2011; Andell & Pitts 2018), which sketches out the key features of gang desistance programmes based on a community development model. These programmes vary in terms of their emphasis and their content, depending on the nature of the gang problem in their area. Although 'one size' does not fit all, a consideration of the elements of these programmes may be suggestive in terms of the development of a multi-agency gangs programme in Waltham Forest to be delivered via Youth and Community Hubs. In his evaluation of three successful gang desistance initiatives in London, Pitts (2011) sketched out the key features of an effective programme:

- It would target gang-involved children and young people utilising a 'Traffic Light', Risk Assessment Instrument to establish the depth, nature and risks of young people's gang involvement. This would enable the programme providers to develop a range of interventions of the right type, intensity and duration. To succeed however, all the relevant agencies, schools, and residents would need to be involved in the assessment because some 'serious players' may be unknown to statutory agencies.
- It would have an Outreach Function usually pursued by street-based youth workers skilled in making and sustaining contact with 'hard-to-reach' groups to draw them into the programme (Crimmens et al., 2004).
- It would have an intensive Groupwork Programme which focused upon the development of alternative routes out of gang involvement and 'leadership' training. The effects of these programmes would be maximised if they had one or more residential episodes which took participants to an unfamiliar setting where they were required to engage in unfamiliar group activities.
- It would have a Casework Function in which criminal justice, youth work and or social welfare professionals worked with the young person and their families to support involvement in the group work programme, address family problems, and (re-)establish links with school and/or relevant social welfare agencies.

- It would establish a Presence and a Base in a Gang-affected Neighbourhood and allow continuing contact with gang-involved young people beyond the life of any particular intervention.
- It would provide continuing practical and emotional support in the form of Mentors, 'Buddies' and/or a Drop-in function.
- It would have access to the services of Education, Training and Employment Specialists who would work with gang-involved young people to maximise their skills and knowledge and effect realistic choices about their futures; and with local employers, colleges and universities to open up legitimate alternative pathways for these young people.
- It would have access to the services of a specialist Housing Professional who could, if necessary, enable young people under threat to move to suitable and suitably supported accommodation in another area.
- It would have a Mediation Team that would keep contact with all local gangs and crews, enabling it to intervene to defuse inter-gang conflict and thereby reduce tit-for-tat violence.
- It would have a Through-care Function involving regular visits to gang-involved youth in YOIs or prisons by project staff to draw them back into the project/ programme on their return, which is often a point at which violence erupts.
- It would also have a dedicated Girls and Young Women's Intervention Team

The research recommends that the tenets of the above gang desistance model be built into the development of the proposed Youth Hub(s) and delivered locally by co-located Gangs Intervention Team(s).

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