

## **Street Weapons Commission – Birmingham**

### **Kirk Dawes and Tom Coughlan**

#### **Cherie Blair**

Welcome, gentlemen. We've got Kirk Dawes, now of the West Midlands Mediation and Transformation Services, but a former police officer yourself. And Chief Superintendent, Tom Coughlan, who's commander of the Queen's Road Operational Command Unit and working together in partnership to use mediation as one of the tools in tackling this whole question of gun and street crime. Can you tell us a little bit about... your methods, Kirk?

#### **Kirk Dawes**

Right. I think it really started some years ago whilst I was still a police officer, when I was given the remit with another officer at the time and a section superintendent to look at gun crime outside the box. In other words, at the beginning of this century we were plagued obviously by shootings. Some of them were in the middle of the day in town centres and the like, and most of them could be described as assassinations in the middle of the day in Birmingham. It was spiralling out of control and, indeed, West Midlands police were responsible for its enforcement and the like, but we felt that one of the things that hadn't been considered is how we actually deal with the individuals and the individual conflicts, how we might slow those down and hopefully one day work towards a resolution in terms of the behaviours that were out there. We went across to other parts of the world to have a look at what was being done in terms of guns and gangs, and I'd already got a role within the... it was National Black Police Association at the time to look at that. But doing the work for the West Midlands kept leading us back towards Northern Ireland, and in Northern Ireland what we actually saw was the use of dialogue. In other words, how do you get warring peoples to sit down and talk about their differences without using extreme violence or to slow that down. We saw in Northern Ireland that and, you know,

looking at what was then going into the Good Friday Agreement, whereby it was something that had never been tried in England, and certainly not something that was being done here around criminality. One of the questions was how do you talk to criminals, this is when I was a police officer, of course, how do you talk to criminals when you should be locking them up and throwing away the key. And that's very much who I was at that time. However, in looking at it in that particular way, we saw that there was, there was an area whereby we could actually deal with some of these conflicts, and not just those that were in the community. Those that extended to people that were in prisons and the like. We, in looking at it, we decided that what we had to have was credible organisation, where people were trained to do the particular role they were going up to undertake, and when we went to the public authorities to look at the picture, is this possible, what we actually found was that through the Chief Constable of the West Midlands Police at that time, that he was prepared to take that leap of faith that we, we really needed. That was...

**Cherie Blair**

But did it work?

**Kirk Dawes**

Pardon?

**Cherie Blair**

Did it work?

**Kirk Dawes**

Yes, it did. I would say...

**Cherie Blair**

In what ways did it work?

**Kirk Dawes**

Well, in 2002 we had a large number of murders, and if you look at the numbers really that went up before four years before 31<sup>st</sup> of December of last year, there was a significant drop. What was different, the different was the co-ordination in an approach towards it. I was there at the beginning when we looked at what, you know, what does a strategy look like, how could we possibly work together and what partnership and what collaboration was, cos most of it was collaboration. Critical incident, dragging the community, have a chat, we've all got to do this together. They would go away and some [COUGH] and then when it was felt that it'd slowed down then something else would happen and they would almost be taken out of the drawer to work with again, rather than that on-going relationship that meant that we'd actually working together and this was with the community. The setting up of the mediation team gave us something else and that was the ability to actually speak to the people who were involved. The protagonists themselves. Those who were picking up guns and shooting them to each other. Outside of an interview room and outside of prison. To get them, not just as we were trying to do then, to think outside the box.

**Cherie Blair**

We've heard about this sort of three hours that we were just heard it from the last witness again, and the, this whole idea, you know, nowadays a lot of the stuff around guns seems to be about revenge. It seems to be about using a gun to get respect. And I can't remember what the third 'r' is... revenue...revenue, money. Er what's mediation got to do with any of that?

**Kirk Dawes**

Issues of respect is that which we all want for, for ourselves... most of the time, more than for each other. We would find that where you had a dischargeable firearm, or a killing, normally the first shot that goes off in a conflict isn't designed to kill, but to tell somebody that if you do this this is what I can do. What we found out in the revenge was that was the death.

The in-between part in that was who was going to go out then, engage these people to actually deal with it together. In other words, let's talk to each other, let's create a better understanding and let's truly find out what the real conflict is. We realise there would have to be other people, independent, as far as they were concerned, and, and, indeed, independent as far as the police were concerned. So it was about getting them to a table to talk together, to talk to each other so that we could try and resolve some of the issues.

**Cherie Blair**

Well, let me just ask Tom briefly. Tom...

**Tom Coughlan**

COUGH

**Cherie Blair**

You're still in the police force as, as opposed to Kirk who's left, I mean what's the police attitude to this? Do you feel that this has worked, or...

**Tom Coughlan**

Absolutely. I mean it's certainly a leap of faith for er for a public agency to work in this way and trust the experts, the mediation service, to actually work in the community and try and prevent that conflict resulting in... a serious injury or death to someone. And that's exactly what they do. They take referrals from within the police service

themselves. They will take most of their referrals from the community themselves and their job is to stop people getting killed on the streets. Now the methods they would do that are, you know...

**Cherie Blair**

But isn't it, isn't it the police's job to stop people getting killed on the streets?

**Tom Coughlan**

Yes, but what where we have an opportunity to receive, report, receive information, receive complaints and investigate that and stop people getting killed, but the reality is that in 2002, before we had the mediation service, there was 27 gang related murders in Birmingham. Last year there was two and the previous year there was two. So that unique dimension amongst many others that are involved in the, the Birmingham Reducing Gang Violence Partnership, it's a multi-tiered approach, but a critical part of that is this conflict resolution, this ability to speak at the very high risk end to those people that are intent on, on doing harm to someone else. So it's unique to Birmingham, but it's a critical part of the multi-tiered approach.

**Cherie Blair**

So you're identifying the people most likely to be engaged in this, and then you're engaging in continuous dialogue with them, not simply only speaking to them when something's gone wrong. Is that basically what we're talking about?

**Tom Coughlan**

Yes. I think the work, you know, Kirk's team and, and mediation service, it, it's a mediation and transformation service. So it is very much involved in not only resolving that conflict, but trying to encourage those that want to exit the

gang lifestyle and provide a pathway of support and, and recognition and help from the public agencies to actually allow them to do that. And that is why the approach in Birmingham is very much based on existing public protection arrangements. So we have a, you know, a MAPPP arrangement, a multi-agency public protection panel in Birmingham, and also, you know, shared priority forum under the National Offender Management Strategy, that looks at that risk associated with the gang violence. So at the very top tier of risk, then we would deal with them under public protection arrangements, in the same way that we'd deal with a very dangerous sex offender, and for those that present a lower threshold but still a risk, then we would deal with them as priority offenders under the National Offender Management Strategy, where, traditionally and nationally, we work with prolific offenders. In Birmingham, we work with prolific offenders and risky priority offenders, and we're using that national approach that already exists across the country.

**Cherie Blair**

Mark?

**Mark Johnson**

More questions occurred. So who are your mediators? What's the profile of the mediators that go in to do the work?

**Kirk Dawes**

The mediators can actually come from anywhere, but they mainly come from the community. But we've got, in terms of like [COUGH] skill and the like, we've got a forensic psychologist, for instance, all the way through to somebody who was involved, you know, some years ago in gangs themselves. In between, there are people who are firemen, youth offending workers, probation officers, mothers who have lost their children, mothers

who have had children shot. So there's a wide range. And because of the way that it has gone since we started to look at it, we represent the diversity that we have in Birmingham in terms of ethnicity, gender and the like. And it really is, I mean, and the question was asked of Tom about whether or not this was an on-going thing, well, that's our relationship with some of the people who are involved in the use of extreme violence, I will call it, or those that would sort of damage social cohesion.

**Mark Johnson**

So what's the sort of, what's your experience with the willingness of people wanting to take part in it? And what's the sort of, have you had successful outcomes, or...?

**Kirk Dawes**

I think that... no, I know that, when your life's in danger, people will take help from virtually anywhere. With us, as it started, when we first started, most of our referrals came from the police under that partnership that we've got with other agencies as well. But today, what I would say to you, most of the referrals come from the community. They come from the people who are involved themselves and likely to die. Some of those who already exist within prisons, who make phone calls to relatives or even directly to us, when they know, after a long period of er imprisonment, they're coming out to a conflict that just because they were sentenced, that didn't resolve it, but it needed resolving before they came back out.

**Liam Black**

Sohe's, he's in another gang and I think he wants to kill me.

**Kirk Dawes**

Yes.

**Liam Black**

I don't want to be killed, and I don't want to shoot him. My mum will contact you or I will phone you up and say, hey, Kirk, come and help me. I don't want, I want this to be over between us now, or at least I don't wanna get shot. You then phone him up and say, hey... Liam's not interested in this any more. Can we talk? Is it as...

**Kirk Dawes**

We will make...

**Liam Black**

Is it like that?

**Kirk Dawes**

Yes, it is. We will make the contact ourselves through prisons, through the Prison Lia... the liaison officers within the prisons to engage that person that's in er that's in prison, but also... yes, it happens as simply as that. And sometimes from, the people who are involved themselves. It can be the mother, the sibling... it could be from a member of the community, because the biggest thing about mediation for me is this; at one time we were dealing with just pure incidents. We are now at a stage where the community will tell us about what is rumour and innuendo. The police cannot deal with that. They look for information and intelligence that leads to something. But we had and experience here around a disorder er a couple of years ago, where there was rumour, and that rumour went on for about 10 weeks, and had you had people who knew how to go into the community and create better understandings with a meditative approach, it could have stopped that which was like 48 hours of of serious riots

**Liam Black**

Like in Northern Ireland though, there would be people that take... the guys may never meet, but they would take messages between saying it's just not true that... he intends to do this or he did that. Is that part of your service too?

**Kirk Dawes**

We would as they call in mediation terms, shuttle between the two to create that better understanding. But because we do it and because they're all trained and accredited to deliver this, the whole idea would be to bring them together. However, there comes a needs must where you do shuttle between the two to take the as I say, the better understandings of what the conflict might be about.

**Commissioner**

Hi, Kirk.

**Kirk Dawes**

Hi.

**Commissioner**

I'm interested in, you mentioned er a gang exit strategy. Often times there are situations where people want to leave a gang but a gang isn't happy for them to leave. I'm just interested in how or what, what sort of services you've got available, or how you go about facilitating that and, and what moves are necessary to make that happen?

**Kirk Dawes**

I think that lies within the strategy Birmingham reducing gang violence, in so much as we really deal with conflict engagement as specialists, however, we

will provide a mentoring programme for some people who are actually coming out of prisons. With us, we target the behaviour rather than the association, because sometimes that's an action plan that's way too far based on relationships over many, many years. But when we target the behaviour more often than not they naturally start to move away from that lifestyle and some of the friends that are involved. Birmingham is...

### **Cherie Blair**

But how, how does that work? I'm a young man and I find that I get what I see to be respect from my community because I have a gun, and indeed I'll probably get money, I have revenue because I've got a gun? Why do I suddenly decide I want to put that down?

### **Kirk Dawes**

When you speak to most of the youngsters that are involved in this, most of them do not want to be a member of that gang that does the level of violence that they do, because they know that one day it will be them. It's about taking them out of their mind and into a reality cos some of them don't see what is possible. By working with them, and I think I'll use the, the example of the MAPPP. With the MAPPP and particularly where people are prioritised to be involved with, what will happen is is that a mediator and sometimes a probation officer, or indeed one of the other people from the wraparound services such as registered social landlord is providing a [INAUDIBLE] we'll go and see them in prison. By engaging them what used to be for them coming out on licence would be a visit to a probation officer once a week. That would be it for maybe an hour, if that, if that long. It might be five minutes. Within the system that we operate here is this; they have a mediator for the conflicts, they have a member of a mentoring team that normally comes from a utilised er registered social landlord [INAUDIBLE] one you add to others. They will have the Police Offender Manager and the they will

have the probation officer. Within a given sort of week, two week period, they'll be seen probably three or four times. That way we build a relationship then whereby they contact us when they've got any problems whatsoever so that it can be dealt with in real time, rather than leaving it to fester as it were. When we do that, the longer they're away from their, from those people who are the bad behaviors, cos within a gang there are always one good kid that will say you shouldn't do that and the other, but by keeping them away from the bad ones for longer periods of time, they start to move away themselves. They talk about, and their term is, I can sleep with them both closed rather than one eye open.

**Commissioner**

Well, that, that's in a case where... that happens over a period of time. So through a sort of mutual understanding if you like. But I'm, I'm talking about when somebody has had enough of being in a gang, wants to leave and wants to leave now. How does your group facilitate that?

**Tom Coughlan**

[INAUDIBLE] because if it goes back to the use of the civil injunctions and the asbo's, it's very much a carrot and stick approach that we, that we apply to an individual, in that the carrot is the encouragement, the mentoring, the support that we'd be able to provide across a group of agencies to actually encourage that exiting of the

lifestyle, but the stick is to say that, look, your behaviour is such that we need to protect the public at this particular time. And therefore a combination of that approach just creates an environment where we can actually start a dialogue and an understanding and an encouragement to individuals.

And in fact, you know, people have, have actually breached their anti-social behaviour order, have been arrested by the police for breach of the anti-social behaviour order and have said during interviews with the police officers that

that anti-social behaviour order saved my life, because it's prevented me from associating with the people that might draw, draw me into that violence or being in the places where I might be tempted to use that particular violence. So it's been very powerful to actually allow that facilitation, that exiting from the gang lifestyle.

**Commissioner**

Yes, but that is on the other side of what I'm trying to get at. What I'm trying to get at is the person who wants to leave a gang, the gang doesn't want him to leave. He wants to leave of his own volition. What sort of help can your services offer to get that person away from the gang? To avoid reprisal, if you like.

**Tom Coughlan**

Yes, I think that there's a front end wraparound service in terms of support, but there's also protective services that we could provide in terms of re-housing, and we have, you know, very clear housing protocol with partners within the city council and some major registered social landlords, that allow that where there's potential for reprisal or victimisation, then we can actually take that individual away from the environment that's actually giving rise to those particular situations. And that's part of the wider partnership.

**Cherie Blair**

Howard?

**Howard Williamson**

[COUGH] yeah, I mean, I can see this working around revenge, and I can see this working around respect, if you like, threats to identity and rumours and all the interesting stuff that we had in the paperwork about being killed by gossip

and that sort of stuff. When it comes to revenue, turf wars, fighting over, if you like, illegal economic markets,

I don't get it. I don't see how this mediation process can actually persuade people out of something that is their actually daily bread and butter and their living, unless they're actually... given some possibility of finding new economic markets, hopefully legal ones, to operate in.

**Tom Coughlan**

Yeah, I mean I think that revenue is one of the factors that gives rise to that rivalry, which gives rise to the use of that particular violence, and what we're looking to do as part of the wider partnership is replace that with some of the norms in society in terms of education, training and ultimately for some a job, and, and that might be difficult for some employers

to take individuals that have got that acute baggage associated with criminality. But actually the depth and the strength and the maturity of the partnership in Birmingham is that we're actually starting to talk with employers, talk to the wider workless-ness partnerships in Birmingham about how exactly do we create that situation that gives us [INAUDIBLE] the real sustainability.

**Howard Williamson**

Okay, thanks.

**Cherie Blair**

Okay.

**Lord Geoffrey Dear**

Thank you for what you said, and obviously you're claiming a lot of success and I'm sure that what you do is successful. But I am confused, setting all that against what you gave us in, in the written submission. You're words, the

assessment of the impact of the scheme from a quantitative perspective, is problematic for a number of reasons. One of them that you say, and again I quote, is relatively easy to assess the number of gun related crimes. It is more difficult to understand how many of these are gang related. And then a number of concurrent activities from the number of concurrent activities, it is impossible to tease out the impact of the scheme. Now, I think what you're saying is that you're operating with a lot of other not dissimilar schemes operating around you. To what extent is your undoubted success in some areas, to what extent is that, is that reliant solely on your activities and how much do you find the success is also linked to what other people are doing in society, or maybe what the courts are doing, or, or maybe what the economic situation is creating? I don't know quite how you draw out your own impact from all the other factors that are in play, cos you said yourself here that it's, your words, impossible to tease out the impact of the scheme.

### **Tom Coughlan**

Yes, I think that the base line in terms of of measurement, when I talked about the level of murders that we had in, in 2002, it's what we know, it's what the community knows, what the police knows, what the public agencies know. The comment that I'm making there is that, that we'll perhaps never know how many acts of violence or deaths that we prevent by introducing conflict resolution and mediation into the community. Now what I would say in terms of trying to judge the impact from a policing perspective is that we're very clear in Birmingham it's not a single enforcement approach that that's found in the criminal justice system and that... risk removal and punitive action is the sole method of actually reducing this problem. It's about prevention. It's about rehabilitation. It's about resettlement. It's about appropriate use of enforcement and it's difficult to say which one of those particular

interventions is making the most impact, but what I can say clearly in Birmingham is a combination of that approach has made a significant impact to deaths [INAUDIBLE] and, and safety in the community, you know. That reduction in serious violence is, is quite significant. The police play a significant role. They play a significant enforcement role. We do use [INAUDIBLE] to stop and search. We do use, you know, effective use of firearms intervention. Effective enforcement about warrant intervention. And, but we realise that is only part of the picture and that's why the approach in Birmingham is seated in partnership. It's seated within the crime and disorder reduction partnership. It's about partners working together. But mediation and conflict resolution, I'm bringing evidence it's a significant part of what we do. But it's difficult to quantify the real impact of that.

**Cherie Blair**

Well, thank you, Kirk Dawes and...

**Commissioner**

Who pays for this, by the way?

**Tom Coughlan**

Again, it's, it's funded from public funds, from partnership funds, through the Birmingham Community Safety Partnership, which is the local crime and disorder reduction partnership, and we're looking to, you know, establish a baseline that will give us confidence to erm to work this in, in the longer term.

**Cherie Blair**

Well, thank you, Kirk Dawes and Tom Coughlan, for coming and telling us about mediation. I'm a mediator myself, so I think it's really good thing to do.

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