

Street Weapons Commission – London

DCC Jon Murphy

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Hello Deputy Chief Constable John Murphy. We were yesterday in your city of Merseyside. We're here obviously today to look into specifically violent crime and guns and knife crime in particular but perhaps from your position in the Home Office now as Head of the National Tackling Gangs action programme can you give us an overall view about the scale of the problem across the country?

John Murphy

First of all the National Tackling Gangs action programme has actually now completed its six month period of work albeit that the work has not been forgotten as such it has fallen back into the violent crime unit and some of my team have actually stayed within the Home Office to make sure that the work maintains its momentum. But I was asked to lead a cross government team including people from the cities that we were engaged in which were Liverpool, Birmingham, London and Manchester. Following the tragic death of Reece Jones in Liverpool. I think it's fair to say there was already some excellent work going on in all of those cities, and elsewhere, in relation to the problem of young people, violence, gangs and in particular in the context of the work that I did in relation to guns. I led that team for a six month period looking at what experiences those cities had had. What we could learn and what we could spread as best practise around the country. The end product of all that was during the course of the six month we funded one and a half million pounds worth of enforcement and prevention activity in those four cities. We produced practise guidance drawing on what we felt was the best practise from the four cities that is now available to everybody who either has a gang problem or believes they may have an emerging gang problem. And finally we made policy recommendations to ministers which are currently being considered in terms of what the government can do to further improve the effort to tackle the problem.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Well we heard your Chief Constable yesterday say that there's a mixture of firm policing but also of course community involvement that's required. Would you say that this two pronged approach is the way ahead?

John Murphy

I think it's more than the two pronged approach. I think it's a multi faceted approach. And I think if there was one thing that we learned during the course of our work is that enforcement is not the solution to this problem. Enforcement is a response and robust enforcement is a very important response and it's almost invariably the first response. But alone it remains a response.

It's not until everybody else who's got a role to play in dealing with this problem comes to the table, share responsibility for the risk, shares responsibility for providing a solution that we actually will get to something that looks like a sustainable solution. And I think the last part of the jigsaw is actually mobilising communities to become part of the solution. I think that's the biggest challenge.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

And of course that is a big challenge for the police particularly within our minority ethnic communities who can often feel that they're unfairly targeted by the police.

John Murphy

I think that's absolutely right. I think it's a challenge for all communities where people feel intimidated by some of the activity the gangs and young people are engaged in, but it is a particular acute problem within some of the minority communities that are suffering this type of issue.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

How do the police tackle that question of having to be firm and to react and to enforce the law and at the same time in doing that risk alienating the vast majority of law abiding people who feel they're being unfairly picked upon?

John Murphy

Well my own experience of that is that is not actually happening and that's perhaps a change in the nature of our society. Prior to doing this role I was the Deputy Chief Constable in Merseyside and I've spent 32 years policing there. And I've got a long history of policing that community .and what we've seen in particular of the last two or three years is a very

positive community response to the robust policing that is taking place. Now sometimes that policing is very inconvenient for people. It disrupts people. But communities are recognising that it's a manifestation that somebody cares about their problems and are doing something about it. I think it needs to e said also that it is not necessarily a one size fits all solution because the problem is not the same everywhere.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Gus can I bring you in on that?

Gus

I'm interested in the joined up thinking that went on within the tackling gangs programme. And my reason for that is this. There's been evidence over the years from the youth justice board about the link between school exclusion and youth offending. And we know that the boy who was stabbed to death in Southwark last weekend had been excluded from the Peckham Academy.

I don't see very much evidence of the government or indeed programmes such as this making schools take some responsibility for what they do with the young people. We were just in Southwark this morning with a group of year six students. And when they were asked what information do you get in school, what discussion do you have in school about these matters?

Even though the young people are being killed in Southwark pretty regularly all of them said either very little or none at all. So what was the correspondence between your work in the Home Office and what the CFS does in relation to these matters?

John Murphy

I think the great benefit that the tackling gangs action programme bought that hasn't been

seen before was it brought everybody to the table. The ministerial task force chaired by the Home Secretary all the relevant government ministers were there including education. I think the point you make is a fair one and I think it reflects our finding that whilst there was an awful lot of

good work going on around the country often that was not shared. Now for example I went and visited. I visited a number of places. Went into communities. Saw for myself one the difficulties and two what people were doing about it. and I visited a particular project in Manchester which was designed specifically to assist, facilitate and support young people who

were excluded from schools. So I think the experience that you have there is not universal experience. I think the challenge now is to pick up all these things that are working in different parts of the country and replicating those, investing in those, and hopefully we will start seeing the action coming out the back of the findings that we've put to ministers and the action plans that are currently being constructed to deliver on those recommendations.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

if I bring in Jeffrey Dear now.

Jeffrey Dear

Mr Murphy we're really in this commission looking at cause and effect. And we shall be concentrating a lot on the cause. And the police of course deal with the effect as we've already heard and in many cases dealing with it very robustly and very well. when you were engaged in the tackling gangs action programme in the Home Office you let us know in advance that there

were four things that you were particularly concerned with and I wanted to pick two of them out and ask you for a response on that. And that's firstly the use of civil orders to restrict gang members. I'm very interested in that and how you see that being taken forward. And then the supply of safe houses and all the ancillaries I think the witnesses would come into that

rubric as well. Looking after victims, witnesses, those who are seeking to help the judicial process on the one hand but also not wanting the flashback that could come by becoming public. Can you deal with those two issues for us in fairly quick time?

John Murphy

If I deal with the injunction issue first. That is part of what we in policing would call disruption and disruption has many facets. In Merseyside for example you may have heard yesterday about Operation Tango which is removing vehicles from the roads and denying these young people criminal use of the roads. The injunctions is a particular initiative in Birmingham. Where

the Birmingham anti social behaviour unit which is joint agency where working with the police in securing civil injunctions on members of particular gangs to restrict their criminal activity. Now the driver behind it is often these people are engaged in criminality and this is where the two things are linked but we can't get statements of complaint from members of the public. Sometime s

we can't prosecute them for the actual criminality so we use other methods to try and disrupt their activity. And civil injunctions with the civil burden of proof give an opportunity to restrict the lifestyle of people who are embarking on criminal behaviour in gangs. There is another element in that whilst you have them under that control it gives the opportunity to bring in other

measures such as diversion, education schemes, to try and facilitate young people getting out of gangs and exiting the lifestyle. In relation to the second point you made which has slipped my mind.

ALL SPEAKING

John Murphy

Yes there is a lot spoke about the ability to secure witnesses. There were many comments passed in Liverpool and indeed in other places about walls of silence. That's actually misleading. There are many, many people who want to talk to the police and are willing to talk to the police they're not actually witnesses to the crime. So but it is difficult often to secure

witnesses coz they're often the people who one, are closest to the crime and two, are embedded in the communities where the crime has had an impact and are obviously concerned for their future safety. What we've been working on and we've had discussions with the ministry of justice in relation to is being able to provide special measures for

witnesses at court at a much earlier

stage in the process. So at the moment the decision to provide for example anonymity or screens in court for a witness is the decision of the trial judge and that decision is made when we reach or we're almost reaching the point of trial. What we have been exploring is the possibility of giving investigators right from the outset the ability to give some kind of assurance to

witnesses as to how they will be treated in the future criminal justice process. And those recommendations are under consideration.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

The difficulty yesterday is we heard from someone from Nottingham victim support who'd been supporting young witnesses in particular and one of the problems though they'd had a very good response to the people they had supported the difficulty they had of course was they couldn't guarantee to the witnesses that after the trial they would be OK.

Commissioner

They didn't even know whether the previous witnesses had been OK or not after the trial.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

So therefore they couldn't even say well we know that in other cases we followed it up and people haven't in fact been intimidated because as you say often the criminals and their associates know exactly where they live, know exactly what schools they're going to and that is a worry for people who want to come forward.

John Murphy

And I think they're all very valid concerns. And I think it would be wrong to pretend that simply by passing the measures I've just suggested that's going to be a panacea and a magic wand. That is not the case. It is a very difficult issue. I've been investigator and a detective for many, many years. I've been involved in witnesses who've been in the witness protection programme

and even in the witness protection programme which is firstly very costly but more importantly for the most part people are simply incapable of living with the requirements of

the scheme because its such a big thing to ask people to remove from their families and everything that they know.

Jeffrey Dear

Can I have one very quick follow up on anti social behaviour orders ASBO as we shorthand it? There has been criticism about the ASBO system in other areas of law enforcement to say that it's very easy to get one or relatively easy to get one but having got it there's no supervision. And so the person with the ASBO wears it as a little badge of pride and nothing happens. And they carry on acting as they did before. Presumably in your programme

you would follow that up quite rigorously and ensure that the ASBO is properly complied with otherwise it would fall flat at the first hurdle.

John Murphy

Well if I can speak for all of the four cities that we were engaged with I mean the purpose of putting the ASBO on in the first place. Well two purpose. One is to control behaviour. And the second one is to give you a sanction when the behaviour or the required behaviour is not reached. And in all the four cities that we were engaged with the ASBO not supervised in the sense of

a probation order but certainly policed. And when people breached the ASBO this was another method of actually controlling peoples behaviour. I mean one of the interesting things that came out of the work that we did and I spoke to many, many people and I went into Brixton, I went to Mosside, into Toxteth, is people saying to me and my colleagues can you please put an ASBO

on my child. I'd love to be able to control my child. I can't. Would you please issue an ASBO? Perhaps not what the legislators intended when the act was passed. But actually I think that's evidence that they do have an effect.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

And Liam, Liam Black.

Liam Black

We were in Croxteth yesterday and having come to this whole issue of gangs and crimes

sort of my involvement before was mainly through the media you go to somewhere like Croxteth and you walk round the estate with some of the local people that are doing some really good work to provide young people with other things to do than hanging around the streets and getting

into trouble and they're saying all this stuff about the Norris Green gang, the Croxteth gang, the Noggs and the Croxs. That's all a media invention. People come here and they impose this analysis on, these are my words now, impose the analysis on what it's like to live round here. And really the problem is we all know who that little deleted expletive was. We're glad he's out

of here. And the idea that this community torn apart by these gangs fighting each other on the ground wasn't there or we were told it wasn't there by the people who are the ones supposedly being terrorised by these gangs. So this is a complicated question about policing, media, public perception, but specifically about Croxteth where we went what's your view of

someone who has policed that area for so long?

John Murphy

I think the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. I think the media have got a lot to answer. I mean that is an issue that was put to me many times. You know there wasn't an issue with gangs until the media made it an issue. I'm not sure that's actually true. I don't think the media have helped in some of the sensationalism in the reporting but I know from my personal experience

there clearly is a number of gangs who operate in the Croxteth area of Liverpool just as there are in some of the boroughs in London and there are in Birmingham and there are in Manchester. And some of them have been around for a long time. I think what the real concern with the gangs is that, and it comes back to the point I made earlier about enforcement

not being the solution. There's been some real robust enforcement gone on when perhaps it was thought it was the solution. Some of the upper echelons of these gangs have been arrested or subject of ASBO or simply faded away and a vacuum has been created. And that vacuum has been filled by a younger type of offender who's got a much quicker flash to bang

mentality. Who either incapable of thinking through the consequences of pulling the trigger

or don't want to think through the consequences of pulling the trigger. So I think to come back to the point I don't think the media have helped but I think to pretend that there isn't a problem is not helpful either.

Liam Black

That's interesting isn't it because that ex offender talking to us about he'd spent a long time in prison and now he was trying. Bob Croxton. He made this comment that the old style gangs there was a kind of honour. They had guns but they were all good guys really. They've been superseded by these kind of anarchic kids who will do anything. Is that true? In terms of the change of the demographics of the gang is there anything in that?

John Murphy

Well I think the change is just as I've described. You know there's been concrete enforcement action taken against a number of individuals who were a serious problem. Sometimes the police and actually the police have been highly successful in taking weapons off the streets and the figures would show that but they don't always recover all of the weapons. They remain in circulation and one of the things that I'm particularly concerned about and I have a particular bee in my bonnet about is the use of mobile phones in prison. Because it's quite clear that some of the criminal activity that's been conducted by these young people is being directed from within the prison system. And I feel that's something we must do something about.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Can I just bring Fay in?

Fay

We had some suggestions yesterday that we should be looking at greater gun control and in particular focusing police attention on people who are reactivating guns. And obviously we have a problem with knife crime as well which is a whole different ballgame. But in terms of guns is that something that you've looked at?

John Murphy

We have looked. I mean when I was given the task in the first instance the focus of my task was the dynamic in the impact area. But my view has always been that unless we do something to choke off the supply of guns in the first place, and that starts in the countries where the weapons are coming from, then we're always going to be limited in what it was we could achieve.

One of the challenges with stopping guns coming into the country is unlike controlled drugs if you have a consignment of cocaine for example that comes into the UK from Columbia from the minute it leaves Columbia it is an illegal commodity. And it crosses borders. And there is a vested interest in every jurisdiction to do something about it. That is not the case with weapons.

you can go to Calais on the ferry and buy a gun. So there is a big, big challenge. And I think it's absolutely vital that the new borders agency and there is actually a recommendation to ministers that this takes place. It is a high priority for them. As it should be for customs and revenue and indeed the Customs and Revenue have put significant extra effort into

detecting firearms traffic and indeed INAUDIBLE organised crime agency have as a consequence of the work that we've done. But I think there is really scope to do more.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

And what about reactivating guns?

John Murphy

Reactivation of firearms as a weapon but the fundamental problem is how they get into the country in the first place. There has been new legislation and it's the Violent Crime Reduction Act and has made it illegal to bring realistic imitation weapons into the country. The legislation has been put in place. We've got to be robust around licensing and about getting weapons

off the streets that are here. And in fact there are many, many such weapons actually sitting in registered firearms dealers at the moment.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Gus I think you wanted to come back.

Gus

Very quickly. Given what you've said about the limitations of enforcement I'm interested in the mediation services for gang members. And want to link that to the issue of the wall of silence. There are many gang members in communities, people won't grass up on them, they know who they are and many of them are murderers. My question is how can one effectively

work amongst those gang members and do so in a manner that does not involve the law enforcement agencies but at the same time reduces the gang activity within communities?

John Murphy

I don't think you can divorce law enforcement agencies but what you can do is deal with communities in that particular context at arms length. The mediation transformation service for example that is in place in Birmingham is having significant success. Now it has been said to me by members of the community in Hansworth actually yeah it's OK but it would be better

if the police had nothing to do with it. Now actually it was the brainchild of West Midlands Police. They put the money into it and it's a great scheme and it is having success. But I think there's perhaps something we can learn there and actually we are rolling out those services as a consequence of T Gap in London and hopefully into other cities. But I think extreme problems

sometimes call for extreme remedies and whilst it might be anathema to tell police officers to utilise the services of reformed criminals there are circumstances where it is the only sensible thing to do. And there are good instances of successfully deploying that kind of tactic both in Birmingham and in London.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

So if I was going to ask you to sum up what's the next step? What's the next thing that you would recommend that we do if we're going to tackle properly this issue?

John Murphy

Well hopefully the government will act upon the recommendations that have gone to the ministerial taskforce which are looking at things like injunctions. They're looking at the

better protection for witnesses. And we'll get the tools to do the job. But I think fundamentally I return to the point I made earlier. Unless everybody comes to the table, accepts their responsibility for their part of the problem and there is an effective government process around tasking of agencies to cover the full panoply of issues that need dealing with to resolve the problem then I'm afraid we're not going to get anywhere.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

It's a multi faced problem and needs a multi faceted answer.

John Murphy

It is.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Thank you very much for coming today.