Building Bridges Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A report by the Young People of London, facilitated by Race on the Agenda (ROTA) providing evidence-based recommendations to tackle Gangs and the use of Weapons

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Foreword by the Chief Executive of Safer London Foundation Tony Shepherd and Dawn Butler MP

Tony Shepherd
CEO, Safer London Foundation

Gangs and the use of weapons in London is a concern for all of us. It is important that we are all engaged in finding solutions to these problems. However, the way to find solutions is to understand what is happening and address its causes. By allowing young volunteers to lead research and produce material which offers some of these solutions, ROTA provides a unique insight into the current situation in London.

This report demonstrates the insight that young people have into these issues, and the ability they have to express their concerns. There is not one solution to tackling gangs or weapon use in London; however, this report demonstrates that we need to think across agencies and sectors to have a real impact. Taking a preventative approach will see long term change; this is the concern for the young volunteers on the Building Bridges Project. By supporting these young people ROTA has empowered them and provided them with a voice and access to decision makers. It is crucial that when we talk about issues that affect young people, we not only consult them, but include them in a meaningful and productive manner. The Building Bridges Project demonstrates that this can, and should, be done in order to see effective changes at both policy and service delivery levels. Given the recent tragic events in London, I welcome this timely report and I hope that everyone concerned with addressing gangs and the use of weapons, including government, seriously considers these youth-led findings.

Dawn Butler MP
Vice Chair for Young People

The Building Bridges Project is an example of the positive contribution that young people can make to the debate around gangs and weapons use; as well as to society in general. There is a lot that can be learnt from engaging in youth led work and it is important that we do this if we want to see change. Young people should be encouraged and supported to participate in debates which they feel strongly about and we need to create better links between government and young people.

For example, Mylifemysay.co.uk is a website that is designed to foster greater understanding between government and young people. I hope that all young people will participate in this debate as well and tell politicians what they want.

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When the new Deputy Mayor for Young People was appointed, he stated: 'We have to talk to young people and find out what affects them and what interests them' (Children and Young People Now, 2008). In addition, in May 2007 the Home Affairs Select Committee stated: 'In drawing up a strategy on young black people's overrepresentation (in the Criminal Justice System), the Government should ensure young people themselves are consulted, and that local and national organisations ensure young people's views are systematically taken into account in forming and evaluating policy'. Most recently, The Street Weapons Commission's Report, Guns, Knives and Street Violence concluded that 'It is important not to oversimplify these issues…Local contexts, especially, young people's experiences and perceptions would seem to be a necessary starting point' (June 2008). There seems to be, therefore, an interest both on a national and regional level, to hear what young people identify as criminal justice problems and furthermore, what they would like to see as solutions.

The use of weapons amongst young people, and the existence of gangs, seems to be increasingly a key concern in the public domain; in both media accounts and political rhetoric and policy. However, these have been concerns of local communities in London for years, if not decades; and it is the Third Sector who has been responding to this. Given current political interest in this area, most recently with the report *Tackling Gangs* published in May 2008 by the Home Office, it is vital that the voices of those who are affected most directly by these issues, and by the policies put in place to address them, are heard – namely young people.

ROTA's Building Bridges Project (BBP) is a youth led and youth owned volunteer research project. It aimed to produce a report and materials providing policy recommendations for tackling gangs and weapon use in London. The recommendations were based purely on the views of young people in the light of the current political climate and research that has preceded it. For the past two years ROTA has acted as a facilitator of the project; however the entire project, from funding bids to youth and volunteer funds, to research and through to the production of the report, film, launch event and monitoring has been led, owned and delivered by a team of young people from London, from across boroughs, age ranges, gender and ethnic groups.

The recommendations made in this report have followed research into what we have termed the culture/s within which the use of weapons and the existence of gangs exist. Our concern is *why* we as young people may choose to arm ourselves and/or join a gang; not just the fact that we do; therefore, our recommendations seek to address the 'why' and are preventative rather than

reactive. It is significant that when asked what recommendation they would make to government if they had the chance, not one young person responded with reference to the criminal justice system. As young people, we are concerned with preventing what is happening, by asking why it is; and furthermore alongside accepting responsibility for the role that we play in the existence of these cultures, we are asking that as a society we take a collective responsibility to see through the recommendations made in this report and build on the work already being done in the communities affected to make a change.

Key findings and recommendations

1. Develop policies within an *honest context*

One of the most significant issues that came out of the fieldwork and desk research was that policies and rhetoric around gangs and/or weapon use in London were often being made out of context. Issues such as the materialistic pressures that are being placed upon young people; the extremes of poverty and wealth in London which exasperates these pressures; the fact that it may be safer in some neighbourhoods to join a gang rather than not; and various other constraints upon the choices that young people make are not being given due consideration. Whether we think it is acceptable or not that many young people feel like they need to earn a certain amount of money at a young age, or that they value themselves and others by how much they have is only one half of the coin; the fact is that they *do*; as do other members of the British population, independent of race, age or class. We cannot take young people in a silo and dictate one lifestyle for them, when it is clear that adults are chasing value by power and by wealth. Furthermore, this is wealth by the quickest means possible.

The same applies to the fear that many young people feel on a daily basis, be that when travelling, in school, at social events or even at home. It is not acceptable to just focus on the fact that some young people are arming themselves. We have to ask *why*; i.e. for protection and then address this fear. As a society we should be extremely concerned that some children as young as eight think that the only way that they can feel safe and to survive is to arm themselves or join a gang; society, and the police in particular, is supposed to protect and nurture young people; at the moment it is failing.

Once policymakers begin to be honest about these issues, both in rhetoric and in policy formation, we will have taken the first steps to addressing the issue at hand.

2. Avoid Oversimplification

Having placed what is happening within a context, it is imperative that policymakers avoid simplifying both the situation and the causes or solutions that

relate to it. Both the desk research (Phase One) and the fieldwork identified multiple and complex causes of the existence of gangs and the use of weapons; it was impossible to focus on one. The closest the research got to this was 'broken environments'; a phrase offered by a young person taking part in one of our focus groups. There was agreement in the room about this as it could encompass both the context of what was happening with occurrences themselves, and could be broadened to include schools, regions and even ideologies of a state; as well as narrowed to focus on local areas.

Another area of simplification was the conflation on gangs and weapon use. The fieldwork identified a number of young people who admitted to having carried a weapon, (although not necessarily a knife or a gun) during at least one point in their lives, but who were not part of a gang. Furthermore, of the gangs that were in operation, they varied in history, size, make-up, purpose, identity etc. This concern with a focus on the use of the term 'gang' as a generalisation of all youth violence was recently highlighted in a report by the Runnymede Trust. While the BBP team sees the Hallsworth and Young definitions and discussion on the concept of 'gangs' as by far the most useful, the situation in London has become so chaotic that someone can be at risk due to the postcode that they live in regardless of whether they individually affiliate themselves with the gang from that postcode. Rivalries can develop along geographical lines with or without gang involvement. The same applies to the sale of drugs. Simply assuming that all deaths are related to gangs, or that all gangs fit within a particular model is unhelpful and misses the vast number of young people who arm themselves or sell drugs but are not officially part of a gang.

3. Multi-Agency and Cross-Sector Partnerships

Given the complex nature of the problem and the causes of it – i.e. the 'broken environment', it is vital that the issues are addressed across agencies and are not just a focus of criminal justice. These issues are also a concern for housing agencies, education agencies, employment agencies, health agencies, and all those who deal with social exclusion, alongside criminal justice agencies. Based on the recommendations that were received during the fieldwork, the role of criminal justice agencies should be minimised when addressing the causes of, and taking a preventative approach to, these issues. Furthermore, the role played by the Third Sector, especially that of small BAME and/or community groups, provide invaluable links to communities; breaking down barriers that individuals can face, and offering a level of understanding of local issues that cannot be provided by larger organisations. As such any policy approach should include a multi- agency and cross-sector strategy to address the multiple dynamics of these issues.

The Building Bridges Project received support from the voluntary, private and statutory sectors throughout the two years that it ran. This support came in various forms, from ROTA acting as facilitators to us throughout the project,

through to YOTS and Third Sector Mentoring projects directing young people to the project, and Choice FM providing venues and advertising. The various organisations and companies did not need to provide funding; they provided resources and it is via resources and expertise that partnerships can be effective. If the value of sharing resources and information can be acknowledged and acted upon then the extent of success for any project, policy or initiative can be maximised. Tapping into resources that already exist is a key means to achieving and maximising success – it is not always about money.

4. Invest in Education

For those young people who had thus far avoided weapon carrying or joining a gang, they stated that their power lay in education and skills development. This was not necessarily education that had been provided to them at schools, but also self education, being educated via peer mentors and community-based projects, and lessons of life that they had picked up along the way. The links between school exclusion and crime are all too well known and were highlighted once again in the White Paper 'Back On Track' published in May 2008 by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. When exploring the causes of weapon use and gang affiliation, respondents drew attention to the idea that those who couldn't aspire through education may turn to crime for success. Furthermore, many struggled to identify with much of what they were being taught.

There are a number of issues here that relate to all other recommendations made. Firstly, education needs to be contextualised; there is the repeated issue of a lack of education that relates to BAME children, and the interest for many young people revolves around how to acquire wealth. For schools to address these issues they need to be able to work in partnership more with the Third Sector, private sector and other statutory sector agencies. To elucidate: there are already services that exist in the voluntary sector that provide peer mentoring services, there are volunteering opportunities across sectors and these should be advertised and encouraged. The Building Bridges Project is an example of how volunteering opportunities can develop skills and aspirations of young people; more should be invested into these.

With regards to the curriculum, the concern was that even when black history was being taught it wasn't relevant to those to whom it was being offered; the young people questioned wanted to know about more than slavery and Martin Luther King – they wanted to know about the history of black people in the UK and in their local areas. Human Rights education also has a role to play in developing an understanding of both the rights and responsibilities of young people and how these apply to situations that they may experience.

5. Invest in 'youth-led'

The BBP is itself an example of why it is important to invest in youth led projects. When carrying out workshops for the Greater London Authority (GLA) Guns, Gangs and Weapon's Practitioner's Forum and Independent Academic Research Studies (IARS), to draw out the benefits of youth led work; examples given have ranged from boosting self esteem and providing activities for young people, through to involving those who are directly affected by the issues at hand. If it is young people that are affected by gangs and weapon use then it is young people who will understand these issues best, and furthermore it is young people who will be affected by any policies put in place to tackle these issues. Consulting young people is not enough; they need to be involved from planning right through to implementation of policy in order for change to be effective.

6. Build on what already works

With regards to the above recommendation, and in relation to many of the others, there are already numerous examples of good practice in the Third Sector for addressing these issues and providing the services required. It is the responsibility of funders, local councils and stakeholders to advocate, support, and build upon what is already working. For example; there are already peer mentoring services that are working, link these into schools rather than requiring schools to set them up themselves.

Given the current funding climate many of these local organisations and projects are now in danger of closure and will leave young people with a massive gap in services. A lack of sustainable funding is a key concern for community groups; the fact that many only receive funding for a year has damaging consequences for the young people who rely on such provisions. The introduction of Local Area Agreements (LAA's) and commissioning also puts increasing pressure on small groups who do not always have the capacity to engage with local authorities while also providing services needed at grass roots level. The Commission for Integration and Cohesion's (CIC) recommendation against funding single groups and Communities and Local Government's (CLG) subsequent proposed cohesion guide for funders will potentially see small community and BAME groups lose funding to mainstream organisations. Such shifts in the ways in which the Third Sector is funded will potentially damage, rather than build upon, what is already working at grass roots level to support and provide preventative interventions for young people.

7. Work Local

Building Bridges was a London focused project. Our findings demonstrate the need to tackle these issues at a local level and for recommendations to come from the bottom up. London is a unique place, and given its size the situation is becoming increasingly complex. Given this, while lessons can be learnt from other regions, nationally and internationally, direct policy transfer should be avoided and furthermore, it is essential to take work and initiatives down to borough and ward level as well. Those interviewed made numerous references to localities, especially with regards to territorial rivalries. As young people we are becoming increasingly trapped within our local areas due to risks posed by being caught 'slipping*' in other territories; and as such we need to see interventions and responses being made at a level that is equally as local. Working at this level maximises the chances that the response will be relevant to those it is aimed to benefit.

8. Weapon Variation and Weapon Supply

Much policy and rhetoric around gangs and weapon use amongst young people focuses on knives and guns, and especially on their use. What our findings displayed was the variety of weapons used and carried by young people, including, acid, cs gas, snooker balls in socks, batons, bricks, hammers and maths compasses to name a few. The real issue that should be addressed is *why* weapons are being carried, rather than a dominant focus on what the weapon is. While the lethal nature of both knives and guns were accepted by those interviewed, the point was repeatedly made that these were not the only weapons that could kill or seriously injure someone and this needed to be acknowledged.

Secondly there was a clear frustration by young people with the amount of attention being paid to weapon carrying, as opposed to the limited extent of attention focused at weapon supply. Those interviewed wanted to see a greater effort to address how firearms in particular, had managed to enter into their communities. As a result, they called for a greater acknowledgement of the chain of people and processes that are involved in gangs, especially drugs supply, that does not just involve young people. If work is being done in this area then this needs to be highlighted.

9. Improve Attitudes Towards Young People

As young people, we feel that the level of negative attention that we receive is unacceptable. The findings of the BBP demonstrate the level of damage that is being done by the way in which society views young people, and the way in which we are represented in the media and targeted by policies. Phrases such as 'hoodie' were given as examples of derogatory phrases used to describe young people. Policies such as stop and search and the use of ASBO's, as well as the

‘respect’ agenda were referred to as approaches that appeared to be targeted at young people, where as in reality that should have the potential to apply to everyone.

All of those young people who attended interviews, focus groups or sent in emails, as well as all of the researchers are examples of the positive contribution that young people make to society. They wanted to know why the amount of attention attributed to negative actions of young people was not afforded to them. Such negative attitudes only re-enforce stereotypes and further exclude young people from the rest of society at a time when it is crucial that we are engaged.

10. Do not link gangs to ‘Black Culture’

Analysing current policies and practice, in light of the positive contribution made by the young people on the BBP, there is a concern that gangs are being racialised to the detriment of all young Black people in London. Recent Home Office findings in their Tackling Gangs report identified that 75% of gang members were from African Caribbean backgrounds; however in Liverpool 0% of gang members were identified as being African Caribbean. Furthermore, these statistics were based on police intelligence. Given the push for the stop and search reactions to weapon carrying, and the documented impact that this has on Black boys, there is a concern that findings of such studies as the one in Liverpool are not being emphasised. The low detection rate of recent stop and search operations, discussed later in this report, demonstrates the current risk that exists of alienating young members of London’s Black community.

The links made in political rhetoric between gangs and what is popularly deemed to be ‘black culture’, as well as in the media, and the differing media attention to black and white victims of violent crime are all concerns for the respondents of the BBP. Placing all of this within the belief held by many that the education, employment and criminal justice systems discriminate against young Black people intensifies the lack of confidence in the state to respond to these issues. The volunteers on the BBP are demonstrative of the positive contribution that young Black people make to society; we are the same black people whose race is currently superficially linked to gangs and the use of weapons. Many of the solutions rest with us and yet we are being isolated. In order to see a change this has to stop.

Within the above ten recommendations specific suggestions apply and these can be found at the end of the report. As this report is written by young people and features quotes directly from our fieldwork a glossary of terms that some readers may find unfamiliar is provided in Appendix IV. These words have a ‘*’ by them throughout the report. This glossary was added following a request from the BBP Youth Advisory Group. Its aim is to enable ease of understanding for all readers, without having to interpret or re-write anything said to us during our research. ROTA will use this report to continue to inform policy and practices around gangs

and weapon use amongst young people in London. The BBP team hope that policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders across the sectors will use the findings and the recommendations made in this report to inform the work that they do to address gangs and weapon use in London. It is the responsibility of everyone to address these issues; we are all involved and we can all make a difference.