

**Commission on Gangs and Violence**

*"Working together for safer and stronger communities"*



**west midlands**  
police and crime  
commissioner



**BIRMINGHAM CITY**  
University

# Review of The Commission on Gangs and Violence: Impact, Influences, Reconfigurations and Sustainability

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Anderson

Review of The Commission on Gangs and Violence:  
**Impact, Influences,  
Reconfigurations and Sustainability**

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## Impact, Influences, Reconfigurations and Sustainability

### Background

Violence has been rising in Birmingham for several years, a trend seen across much of England & Wales. Serious violence, such as knife crime, has a disproportionately adverse impact on some of our most vulnerable people and communities, causing great trauma and costing lives, often young ones. In the last five years, knife crime has more than doubled in the West Midlands, from 1,500 incidents in 2015 to almost 3,500 in 2020. Young people are often involved as victims and perpetrators.

Court statistics reveal the scale of the increase among children and young people for knife crime offences in Birmingham. In 2014, 64 under 16s were sentenced for knife crime offences in the West Midlands. By 2020 this number had gone up to 200.

Use of firearms also remains a significant issue in the West Midlands, rising from 562 offences in 2015 to 698 in 2020. The West Midlands has the highest rates in the country per 100,000 of the population (24 per 100k compared to 20 per 100k in London for example). Manchester is 15 and Merseyside 16 by way of comparison. The rise cannot simply be explained by a shift in police activity or priorities. Hospital admissions for assault with a sharp object are up 60% over the same time period – from 275 in 2015 to 440 in 2020. These are patients admitted to at least one overnight stay in hospital typically for stabbing injuries – an indication of the seriousness of the injury.

The Violence Reduction Unit's analysis shows – perhaps unsurprisingly – that the parts of Birmingham most affected by youth violence and knife crime have a strong correlation to the areas with the most poverty and deprivation – areas in inner city Birmingham like Aston, Lozells and Sparkbrook, but also the estates of Kings Norton, Frankley and Castle Vale.

Devastatingly, too many of our children know the sound of a gunshot, or live in such fear that they make plans about how to protect themselves. This violence is serious and on-going in the city. It casts a wrecking ball through our communities and leaves a lasting impact on the people involved at either end of the weapon, on all who care for them, and on all who respond.

Many people and organisations are desperate for this violence to stop. No government department, law enforcement agency, organisation, community, group, or household has the means to achieve this alone. There is important work for all of us to do together to halt the tide of violence that is being experienced now, and to reduce the risks of violence in the future.

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## Foreword

The Commission on Gangs and Violence was a bold move towards engaging the community in responding to the very real issue of serious violence. The starting point was that the work had to be community-led, this was not about statutory organisations making decisions that affect the public, it was about the community telling us what affected them, and how we should work with them to respond to it. The report *Uniting to Improve Safety* was the bringing together of specialist providers, the voluntary and community sector and statutory organisations to work collectively on this agenda. All their experiences and skills were vital to the research, because they facilitated contact with and access to the voices of young people, men and women living in communities across the city, those that were impacted directly and indirectly by serious violence and gang-associated issues.

In December 2017, David Jamieson launched the report and announced that he would spend an additional £2 million on this work. As Chair of the Commission, I welcomed the acknowledgment that investment was necessary to ensure the work could progress, and progress we certainly have. The issue is complex, however the report and its recommendations sought to offer solutions that effectively respond to the concerns, challenges, hurts, hopes and aspirations highlighted in the research – through a public health approach. The 24 recommendations were laid out in the report and covered a number of themes, including community and stakeholder engagement, mapping and networking, offending, education and support for young people, family and community support, faith, funding and business, employment, jobs and training. The review updates on where we are now and what we have still to do.

The intention was to incorporate the work of the Commission into the work of the Violence Reduction Unit in March 2020, however the pandemic has had a significant impact on the work and where we wanted to be now. However despite us not having formally passed the work over, the VRU has picked up the mantle on key areas of work and progress continues to be made, as outlined in the VRU Directors response to this review on page 37. This review gives us the ability to reflect; reflect on those areas that went well, those that have challenged us and continue to challenge us, and think about how we reconfigure those recommendations that need more work, and may also have to be delivered differently. Whilst the Commission was focussed on Birmingham – the area of most significant challenge in response to serious violence – the VRU is a regional model, promoting the adoption of a public health approach to violence in all seven of the West Midlands local authorities. In doing so, it leans heavily on the foundations the Commission provided.

There are key themes reflected in the review, important issues such as sustainability of funding for community organisations working on the ground, embedded engagement structures so that the community continues to be heard. Co-commissioning and co-production of projects are important, ensuring that people with lived experience are involved and valued as part of the process. They are significant. I must take this opportunity to personally thank all those who

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have been involved in this work; the specialist providers are working on the ground, every day, dealing with the reality and supporting members of the community who are traumatised. That support takes many forms and includes those who are offending and those who are victims. A special mention goes to our brilliant Joan Campbell who we lost in November 2019. Joan was instrumental in ensuring that the voice of victims, women and young girls was included in the narrative. We miss this great woman, and Joan, please know that we are carrying on the work that you started with us.

I now formally hand over the work of the Commission on Gangs and Violence to the Violence Reduction Unit. It has been my pleasure to lead on this work on behalf of the people of Birmingham.

Bishop Derek Webley  
Chair, Commission on Gangs and Violence

### Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the valuable work and contributions of David Jamieson, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, for his courageous and pioneering vision, launching the Commission on Gangs and Violence, with an emphasis on developing community- involved and led approaches. I would also like to thank Bishop Derek Webley who chaired the Commission, ensuring that it maintained a truly community-involved approach.

Thanks also goes to Alethea Fuller, Deputy Chief Executive from the Office of the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC), who commissioned this review, for her support, allowing access to key documents and information relating to the progress and activities of the Commission. My appreciation goes to Dr Geraldine Brown, Assistant Professor from Coventry University, Dr Wayne Richards (retired -senior lecturer, University of Worcester / consultant), Dr Martin Glynn, criminologist, Birmingham City University, Daniel Gordon and Zuriel Thompson from the OPCC, for their support in the review process. Their invaluable contributions included, conducting interviews, undertaking relevant research, and offering key insights for this report. I also am grateful to the individuals from the statutory, voluntary, faith, community, and business sectors, who contributed honest feedback for this review, regarding the impact, challenges, gaps, outcomes, concerns and aspirations associated with the Commission on Gangs and Violence.

It would be remiss of me, not to acknowledge that, this review was undertaken during an unprecedented period of dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic, causing much pain and devastation in many communities. Evidence highlights that black (African and Caribbean heritage) and South Asian families are affected disproportionately by the virus. This was noted by some community respondents and Specialist Providers (credible and effective community organisations and individuals, who respond to neighbourhood issues and concerns), who had lost

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friends, family members or an associate, to the virus. Furthermore, with regulations and restrictions, impacting on our capacity to interview some individuals face-to-face, we remain grateful to those who were willing to engage, via zoom, Microsoft Teams, emails, WhatsApp, and the phone, towards contributing to this review.

I am indeed grateful to the wide range of people that have contributed, officially and anecdotally to the report on a confidential basis.



Revd Dr Carver L Anderson

### **Tribute to a Specialist Provider and Community Champion**

**We feel it incumbent on us as at the initial stage of this review, to pay tribute to Joan Campbell, one of the Specialist Providers who journeyed with the Commission from its inception. She sadly passed away in 2019 after a period of illness. Joan was a very valued member of the Commission, known for her tenacity and being a strong advocate for family support, authentic and active community involvement in violence reduction strategies and activities. She remained faithful to the vision of the Commission in its implementation of community-informed and led responses to engaging with victims and perpetrators of violence. Joan and other Specialist Providers, along with statutory sector personnel, made invaluable contributions to the Commission on Gangs and Violence: which has continued to support a community-city response to addressing serious youth violence in Birmingham. We dedicate this review of the Commission on Gangs and Violence to Joan.**

# Impact, Influences, Reconfigurations and Sustainability

## Executive Summary

This is a review of the activities, reach and impact of the Commission on Gangs and Violence which was launched in 2016. The launch took place during a period when the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner made the clarion call for a reimagined strategy towards developing an authentic, sustainable community-informed, community-led and public health response to critical concerns, regarding the then spike in serious violence, use of weapons and associated fatalities. The launch of the Commission started a very serious journey of a partnership that included community, faith, statutory, voluntary, and business sectors. The journey was one towards developing and implementing strategies that were intended to be long term and effective. From the outset it was clear that it was necessary for critical appraisals and explorations of the concerns, challenges, and causes but also the need to develop strategies with solutions. Those solutions included Specialist Providers who were aligned to or leading credible and effective community organisations. They were recruited to jointly lead on the critical exploration and consultations in communities and prisons, they would give us their realities regarding the causalities of violence, and work with the Commission in developing solutions to address the emerging issues.

The Commission on Gangs and Violence: Uniting to Improve Safety Report was launched on the 7 December 2017 at the Aston Villa Football Ground with over 100 community members in attendance. The report contained 24 recommendations and they were categorised under the following themes:

- Governance, Implementation, and review (Recommendations 1 and 2)
- Community and Stakeholder Engagement/Approaches (Recommendations 3 to 7)
- Community Mapping /Networking (Recommendations 8 and 9)
- Offending: Young People/Adults (Recommendations 10 to 13)
- Education /Support for Young People (Recommendations 14 to 17)
- Family and Community Support (Recommendations 18 to 20)
- Faith considerations (Recommendation 21)
- Funding considerations (Recommendation 22)
- Business, Employment, Jobs and Training (Recommendations 12 and 24)

It is from the themes above that this review assesses the impact and reach and also offers recommendations that will need to inform further decisions on the way in which the West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit (WMVRU) and local partners take this work forward.

### **Setting the Context:**

Having had the privilege to have led the research team for the Commission on Gangs and Violence, I now welcome the opportunity to review the journey and impact of the Commission. This review therefore seeks to inform the community, stakeholders and others, all who will be interested in gaining insights and learning from the work of the Commission.

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From the outset, this review acknowledged that, violence and negative gang associated activities has remained a priority for the Commission on Gangs and Violence as the partnership grappled with continued challenges associated with youth violence. Importantly, we also recognise that the Commission has continued to incrementally implement and monitor the 24 recommendations in the report. We also acknowledge that the work and approaches of the Commission played a key role in the successful application to the Home Office for the West Midland Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) which launched in 2019. The partnership establishing the VRU significantly profiled the pioneering work of the Commission, stating that the community-engaged and community-led approaches developed, would be built on by the VRU. Based on these factors, we acknowledge that the Commission on Gangs and Violence has entered a transitional phase and are considering approaches regarding the amalgamation and reconfiguring of activities and recommendations referenced in the report, within the new partnership landscape.

In line with the above, we similarly recognise that the regional establishment of VRU's is central to government plans, over the past eighteen months or so as they lead on the development and implementation of local initiatives to reduce violence. This is by bringing together relevant stakeholders and partners, to ensure effective strategies and approaches can be evidenced, towards feeding into the learning generated by each VRU. At the same time, we recognise that there are community organisations and individuals in local neighbourhoods, who are not funded by the VRU or a part of any organised partnerships, but are involved in violence reduction activities, and have a knowledge and understanding of local community concerns. It is important that these groups and individuals are included in the locality work taking place in the VRUs priority places locality work.

### **Long term sustainability considerations and evidence-based responses required**

The evidence is pointing to the need for an intersection of government, statutory and community sector providers, to engage with discussions, regarding violence reduction, that are long-term and sustainable as already stated. This is highlighted in the Home Office's 'Consultation on a new legal duty to support a multi-agency approach to preventing and tackling serious violence' (2019), as well as the argument for long term sustainable approaches highlighted in the Youth Violence Commission Final Report (Irwin-Rogers, Muthoo and Billingham, 2020). This review strongly acknowledges the complexities associated with developing effective strategies and responses to violence, that experience and evidence confirms, can be spontaneous, planned, or orchestrated, sometimes, resulting in trauma, serious injuries or young lives being tragically lost. These challenges are highlighted in the following response from one of our community respondents:



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With some of the active young people who are involved in criminality, gang violence and disrespect of authority and authority figures, we, know that they are the ones who can bring most disruption and damage to local communities, sometimes with us having to deal with families and friends of young people that have been killed. Based on this, I believe community groups, with staff who have lived experience should be at the centre of any planning and strategic development to respond to issues in those communities and neighbourhoods where violence or the potential of violence is known or suspected.

**(Community respondent /Specialist Provider, B).**

Research and learning from places like Glasgow, New York, Birmingham, London, Chicago, Boston and other cities, along with evidence from this review, supports the argument that there are no 'quick fixes' or easy solutions, to address concerns or challenges associated with violence and criminality. Especially where it has become endemic and normalised with certain individuals, families and neighbourhoods (Gunter 2010; Deuchar 2018). Importantly, Moore (1996) suggests that, some of these entrenched issues are 'Culturally Transmitted', which can be represented in an 'intergenerational transaction' between two groups of people living within the same cultural environment. According to 'cultural transmission theory', individuals and families, for example, can intentionally and inadvertently transmit negative, destructive, anti-authority sentiments, criminal aspirations and other behaviours in the form of attitudes, values and thinking. This then becomes the cultural norm, transmitted from one generation to the next as part of the normal socialisation pattern (Schönpflug 2008). This theory purports that successful criminals provide role models for the young, demonstrating both the normality of criminal behaviour and the possibility that crime may pay.

### **Questions for Commission partnership**

This review presents evidence and recommendations, to support the Commission on Gangs and Violence, WMVRU and other violence reduction proponents, to address issues relating to violence, associated to what Anderson (1999) calls the 'code of the streets'. According to Anderson, this 'code', for some individuals and families, is seen as necessary, credible, normal and a sign of respect and strength. He suggests that, the 'code of the streets is a set of prescriptions, or informal rules of behaviour organised around a desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence' (1999,p. 9). He highlights that, the 'code' emerges, 'where the influence of the police ends and personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin, resulting in a kind of "people's law", based on "street justice"' (1999,p.10).

Responses to the above issues have been varied and numerous, with strategies and interventions emerging from statutory, community, faith, and voluntary sectors, having varying degrees of effect, reach and impact. It is in seeking to understand the degree of progress, impact and effectiveness of the Commission on Gangs and Violence. The Chair along with the Deputy Chief Executive of the OPCC announced this review, in September 2019; it was a specific commitment

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from the launch of the Commission. Importantly, we acknowledge that, although there was an intention to have completed the review for publication in March 2020, the timetable was disrupted due to COVID-19 and the associated challenges as highlighted in the acknowledgements. This inevitably resulted in some engagements, activities and write up being delayed. Along with reflections and suggestions above, this review addresses the following five key questions and areas linked to the development and activities of the Commission:

1. What are the benefits and achievements of the Commission on Gangs and Violence and its contributions to violence reduction?
2. What are the key and significant challenges that may have influenced the impact and progress of the Commission partnership?
3. What strategies have the Commission developed, to implement and sustain community- involved/led and public health approaches.
4. What are the identifiable gaps, and lessons learnt by the Commission, in seeking to effectively implement its 24 recommendations?
5. How could the community-engaged and led approaches of the Commission on Gangs and Violence, be established, or embedded within the structures and activities of WMVRU?

The answers and responses to the above questions were assessed, following a qualitative approach, informed by a phenomenological perspective, allowing respondents to offer insights, perceptions, perspectives, or subjective appraisals of situations (Brown et al. 2016). Within this qualitative approach, it permitted the team to capture the experiences and detailed insights of those involved in or associated to the Commission on Gangs and Violence.

Importantly, the Commission's public health community-informed and community-led approaches have been noted by the Home Office and other local authorities, to be exemplary. This resulted in several visits to Birmingham, by Home Office personnel and other senior leaders from several London Boroughs, to speak with members from the Commission regarding its approaches.

The recommendations in this review have implications for how the recommendation of the first report, and the recommendations within this review, are progressed.

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### Key Findings

#### **Respondent Support, reach and impact of Commission**

The clear evidence from our data, highlights that all respondents to this review were in full support of the development and aims of the Commission on Gangs and Violence, and felt it had the potential to be an effective partnership for the active implementation of a community-informed and community-led ethos with a public health approach.

The Commission on Gangs and Violence Report was said by some, to be one of the most comprehensive ever conducted, into the issues and challenges associated with gangs and serious violence in Birmingham. However, although we have evidence of Commission related activities and programmes, we found it difficult to establish the degree of impact, on those engaged, regarding violence prevention and reduction, because a high proportion of the activities were short-term, therefore having minimal evidence-based data. We do however, acknowledge that improving such evidence-based approaches and impact assessment tools are part of the fundamental work within the VRU.

However, we are still able to confirm that between 2017 and 2020, the Commission funded and supported 26 local groups, who were involved in engaging young people and families, through diversionary activities as well as other interactive gangs and violence reduction support interventions. The interventions included mentoring for young people, community outreach and engagement, programmes for girls involved in gangs, a family approach to addressing youth violence, football and sports related activities, online discussions with young people using social media and podcasts, a cricket academy and skiing, and snowboarding, to name but a few. It also included targeted programmes in schools with young people at risk of being victims or perpetrators of violence, group and one-to-one work, youth leadership courses and parent training. Furthermore, the appointment of two Community Development Coordinators and a Community Facilitator to support community groups in infrastructure building and engaging with community concerns relating to violence, further bolstered the community-involved and community-led approach of the Commission.

#### **Communication and representations**

Although respondents were fully supportive of the vision of the Commission, some felt that there was not enough regular communication about the stages and progress of each of the recommendations in the report. Consequently, Commission partners lacked some of the information needed to hold each other accountable in the implementation of report recommendations. Furthermore, concerns were raised about the lack of a wider racial and cultural community representation on the Commission. In response to this, a community respondent suggest that, the reason for seeing more black representation on the Commission, was due to the lack of ownership from other communities who seemed to be in denial about the degree to which their young people are involved in lifestyles associated with the 'code of the streets' (Anderson, 1999). This evidently raises concerns, given the statistics in police and other data,

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highlighting that both victims and perpetrators are from diverse racial, cultural and geographical backgrounds impacted by crime and violence. Whilst acknowledging the above, there was clear evidence that the Commission made numerous attempts to engage a wider racial and cultural mix, and at the same time, sought to ensure that models and approaches developed, were inclusive and culturally competent. A community call-out was made in April 2017 asking for representatives from across Birmingham to get involved in the work of the Commission, however while we were successful in getting new members of the community engaged, the racial representation was one that remained the same.

This is one area that the VRU has begun to make some headway with already, despite the clear challenges of community engagement during the pandemic, compacted by short term funding limiting the lead in time for activity. The centre of gravity for much of the VRUs work has shifted to very local areas – with nine such projects running during 20/21. These place based projects are engaging regularly with steering groups involving over 200 local stakeholders, and as trust has built, they have increasingly been able to establish youth voice panels and community champion schemes. The VRU has also supported the continuation and expansion of the Faith Alliance which is made up of people from all sorts of different backgrounds, with diverse professional skills and experience and from diverse communities. There remains much more to do.

### **Community- involved and led approaches**

Whilst the Commission on Gangs and Violence Report made it clear that the stated intention is for a community-involved and community-led approach, governance structures and resourcing of meetings were firmly positioned within the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner. This has highlighted a 'custodianship role', which for some community respondents, may have weakened the impact of being truly community-led. However, all respondents were in agreement that, having a member of the community chairing the Commission, along with the tangible and relevant contributions of the Specialist Providers and community organisations, represented a genuine attempt to involve the community as the Commission evolved. This resulted in the Commission being able to gain rich and tangible insights from community organisations regarding some very real and sometimes pained stories relating to the impact of crime and violence in local neighbourhoods as well as in prison. One community respondent for this review stated that:

Birmingham now has a clear and informed blueprint, how to engage with communities impacted by violence and to work together in identifying and supporting both victims and perpetrators of violence, towards developing effective preventative and recovery approaches and interventions that are sustainable **(Community respondent and specialist provider, E).**

### **Public health considerations**

Respondents frequently highlighted the importance of a public health approach to addressing issues associated with criminality and serious youth violence, however we found limited evidence that there was a strong shared understanding of how to apply this approach amongst all sectors in the partnership.

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The key premise that violence should be viewed as a potentially contagious phenomenon with multiple causes and influences and many interrelated factors - therefore necessitates multi-agency and system wide partnership responses is widely understood. This review acknowledges the growing body of evidence relating to public health requiring cross-disciplinary and cross-sector working.

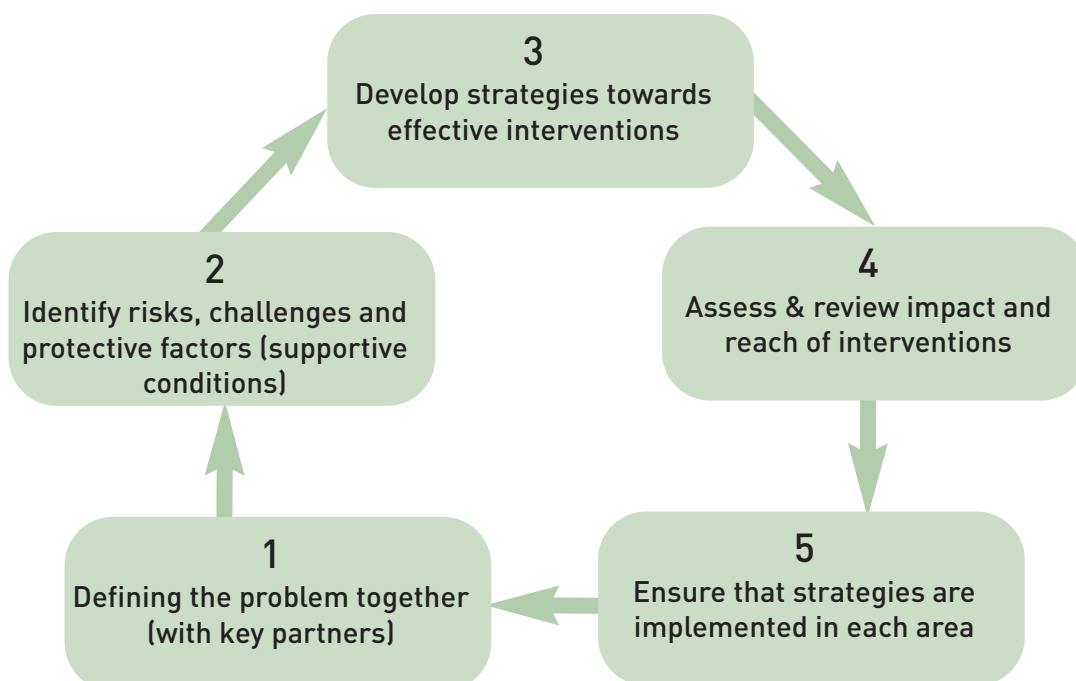
The commission has struggled more to incorporate its strong focus on community-involved and community-led activity alongside that of the multi-agency partnership endeavour. This review is clear that the involvement of credible community groups and organisations, are essential for the effective development and implementation of strategies and approaches to address the causes and impact of serious violence in the West Midlands.

Violence reduction partners should explore together:

- What problem do we agree is of concern/interest?
- When and where did the problem begin?
- Who is involved and what are the influences and drivers?
- Where is the problem located?
- Which individuals or communities are impacted?
- How can we engage with the individuals causing or impacted by the problem?
- What are the causal factors relating to the problem?
- Who should be involved in addressing the problem?

We recognise from our data, Commission partners have at some point covered these questions, however, not in a consistent or systematic manner.

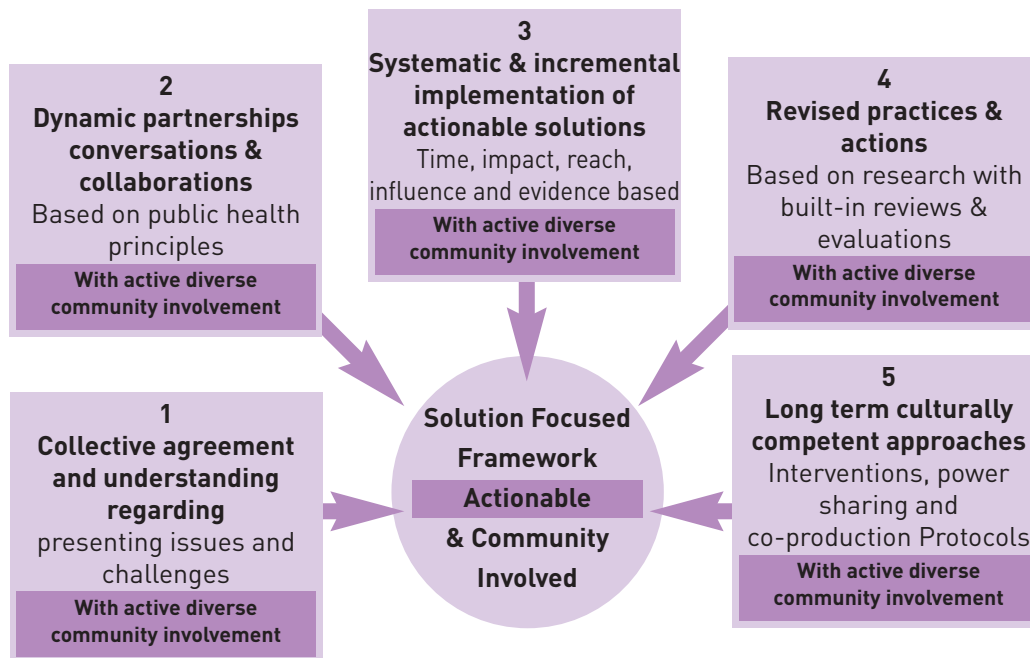
**Figure 1 : Mercy et al (1993) Adapted public health Framework**



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Based on the learning from the Commission and the need for both a multi-agency and community-informed focus, we offer the framework below for agencies to consider their responses against. This offers the opportunity for partnership learning, developing trust and planning together, and effectively engaging the individuals, families and communities who are impacted by criminality, gang and youth violence.

**Figure 2**  
**Public health, community involved and led accountability framework (Anderson 2020)**



This framework should be considered within a range of partnership settings, including in reference to the VRUs emerging Theory of Change.

### Long Term Sustainability Considerations

Our data along with wider UK research, reports and consultations, supports the need for community-involved and community-led, long-term and sustainable solutions, towards addressing violence reduction concerns and issues (Irwin-Rogers, Muthoo and Billingham, 2020). By long term and sustainable, this review means, having partnerships, strategies and frameworks that seek to respond to root causes, far reaching impact of violence and criminality over a sustained period.

This solution focused approach, could for example, be aligned to the priority places highlighted within the VRUs strategic needs assessment ensuring there are agreed partnerships, sustainable funding and in-kind commitments (statutory, investments, donations, community, faith, business and voluntary sector contributions), towards interventions that are preventative, responsive to violence and have wraparound supportive services for victims and perpetrators.

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Given the above, this review does not support the pressures from statutory and government sectors to spend money in haste. This often results in short-sighted and short-term responses, we should be attempting to achieve effective and long-term results. This we suggest is in opposition to the framework, aspirations and approaches, highlighted in Commission on Gangs Violence report.

We further suggest, such responses are contradictory or diametrically opposed to culturally competent public health, evidence-based, community-informed and led approaches, to reducing violence, and inevitably, will lead to failed interventions. By cultural competence, we refer to the capacity, strategies and ability of partners or organisations, to effectively and consistently respond and interact with individuals, families, and communities, impacted by diverse issues, as highlighted above.

This review therefore concludes, responses and approaches to criminality, serious youth violence and negative peer-associated activities, that are superficial (not taking account of the heartfelt realities of community groups/individuals and other stakeholders), racially profiled, tokenistic, reactionary, short-term, having a unilateral approach and not culturally competent, will inevitably result in cycles of ineffective engagements. We suggest, these responses will have little or no impact in tackling the causes and effects of violence in communities.

One community respondent said:

**We needed to have new, creative as well as bolder approaches to deal with the type of violence we see today, with us in Birmingham and the West Midlands, exploring ways to develop and implement strategies for the next 10 to 15 years, to address the issues we are talking about (Community respondent and Specialist Provider, E).**

Within Scotland, the government has enabled the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit to have a 10-year strategy with incremental phases. They fully advocate the need for commitment from a range of agencies and of the people of Scotland themselves, towards presenting the loss of life and permanent physical and psychological damage that violence can cause to communities (Zeedyk et al., 2019). There appears to be a very strong argument for the development and sustainability of VRUs, to aid in active violence prevention and reduction in key regions and areas. This is highlighted in the Youth Violence Commission Final Report.

Based on current funding levels, the cost of running the 18 regional VRUs for 10 years is £350 million. The costs associated with serious violence between young people are of an entirely different magnitude: £10 billion over the coming 10 years assuming rates of violence continue at their current levels. The VRUs would need to reduce serious violence between young people by a mere 3% to be cost effective, and serious violence more generally by less than 1%. Given the potential for the VRUs to bring together a wide range of stakeholders to improve the content and delivery of support to young people at a local level, and to inform

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crucial policy change at a national level, we are confident that they will generate reductions in rates of violence that go far beyond those needed to justify the resources invested in these units (Irwin-Rogers, Muthoo and Billingham, 2020 p6).

### **Approaches and governance considerations**

The review data highlights a Commission partnership that grappled with new and fresh approaches towards understanding the complex and diverse community challenges and concerns regarding violence. Furthermore, as previously stated, its involvement of Specialist Providers with credibility and trust in communities, was invaluable, for the Commission's understanding regarding causes, motivators, and impact of violence. However, some Specialist providers spoke about challenges they faced from some young people, who perceived them to be 'siding with the system' (more specifically the police). This challenge is highlighted in the following:

I don't think statutory sector providers fully understand and appreciate what we have to deal with when active gang associated young people we are working with, start doubting us because of our involvement with the police. It is important to understand that there are still significant trust issues with the youngsters we deal with, who blatantly express distrust of the authorities the police because of previous negative encounters. These are issues we must address as we continue to do our best to balance our work within the community and with Commission partners **(Community respondent and Specialist Provider, A)**.

Our data further acknowledges that, there were some challenges and delays in implementing some of the report recommendations, which were new and needed structures and mechanisms for effective rollout. Some statutory and community sector respondents suggested that there may have been an overly ambitious expectation regarding the capacity of the Commission to implement all recommendations without a realistic timeframe as exemplified in the 'Scottish Violence Reduction Unit 10 Year Strategic Plan'. We further note that although the recommendations were comprehensive and pertinent, it had the capacity to be excessive and limiting at the same time. Given other demands on commission partners the workload they generated required a consistent workforce, both at strategic and operational levels, which needed a greater degree of planning to implement, given that the demands on commission partners who were involved, had other responsibilities and roles. This was therefore limiting and restricting, highlighting the need for a team who were dedicated within a full-time capacity, to fulfil the aims and vision of the Commission.

### **Impact, reconfigurations, and amalgamation**

This review acknowledges that, overall, the Commission on Gangs and Violence have pioneered significant community-involved and community-led approaches and interventions that should be influential in the continued evolution of the VRU. This in effect supports a key aspect in the Home Office's VRU Interim Guidance (2020, p4):



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VRUs will bring together police, local government, health and education professionals, community leaders and other key partners to ensure a multi-agency response to the identification of local drivers of serious violence and agreement to take necessary action to tackle these. This includes being responsible for driving local strategy and embedding cultural change alongside their commissioning role as a means to make the VRU sustainable.

With the launch of the VRU, we again acknowledge the need for a more strategic conversation, so that the strategies and approaches of the Commission highlighted above, are configured and amalgamated within a best practice and learning framework within the VRU. Having said that, we note, there are already a number of recommendations from the Commission's report that are already being progressed within the VRU. These include the establishment of the Faith Alliance relating to violence reduction, the commissioning of four resettlement projects (targeted resettlement and support service for younger adults, up to age 30, identified as either gang members or who are associated with serious violence and criminality); a critical review of approaches to school exclusion, aiming to develop services to address exclusion concerns; the initiative and the teachable moments work in Accident and Emergency. The VRU are also leading on data analysis and evaluation and have already published the first West Midland Strategic Needs Assessment. The public health approach means putting evidence at the heart of policy making and the assessment also enables us to understand the nature, extent, patterns and trends of violence and risk factors in the West Midlands and to produce a clear, yet comprehensive, multi-sector 'problem profile' of violence using a wide range of data sources and supporting information. All of this is being used to inform and support decision making and interventions.

It is from the above context, along with evidence and discussions below, that this review sets out a proposed way forward. It offers sustainable responses for addressing negative peer-associated activities, criminality, and serious violence in local communities across the West Midlands.

## Recommendations and Rationales

### **Recommendation 1: Governance and reconfigurations:**

The Commission is incorporated into the VRU structures to ensure continuation and progress of the recommendations. The recommendations are reviewed in the light of the work taking place to ensure delivery.

### **Recommendation 2: Political Awareness and Support:**

The VRU structures which includes political and strategic leadership, should raise the profile of the incorporation of the Commission work into the VRU.

### **Recommendation 3: Public health, community -informed and community-led approaches**

The community engagement and consultation strand of the strategy of the VRU needs to be reconfigured utilising the significant resources that exist within the structures of the Commission. The VRU Communications and Engagement Strategy builds on consultation with communities, partners and other stakeholders, but is expected to include the following objectives;

1. Co-producing, listening and engaging with local communities to stimulate ownership of the agenda
2. Developing a social movement to underpin the work of the WM-VRU
3. Working across the system with organisations to embed violence prevention as part of everyone's role and building communities of practice
4. It is imperative that the VRU ensures the racial, cultural and diversity balance is addressed.

### **Recommendation 4: Long-term and sustainable responses to violence reduction**

Along with other research reports, our evidence is clear about the need for violence reduction strategies that are long- term and sustainable. We therefore strongly recommend that there are joint representations and lobbying to the Home Office and relevant government departments, regarding the challenges faced at local levels, where short term, reactionary and superficial responses emerge. This representation seeks to ensure:

- There is a collective response, highlighting evidence, raising concerns, and requesting a change, towards sustainable and long-term support (funding, advice, training, co-commissioned interventions and policy changes), more specifically in areas with known deprivation, negative gang activities, violence and criminally active individuals and families.
- Given the establishment of the VRU, further requests to be made for a 10-year support package, supporting the model of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit.

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### **Recommendation 5: Developing and sustaining trust and confidence between community and statutory sectors**

The evidence is clear; this is an area requiring more strategic partnership working. Over the years there has been serious racial tensions, emerging from policing and statutory sector racism and oppression, disproportionately impacting certain groups and communities. We acknowledge the work that is taking place through the Fairness and Belonging Plan seeks to address disproportionality across West Midlands Police, the OPCC and statutory partners, looking for change. The community must be kept up to date on progress so that there is accountability. All sectors must be involved in the work if it is going to make a difference. The Plan launched in July 2020 on the back of the George Floyd killing in May 2020 and the BLM movement further recognises that racism and disproportionality is very real.

### **Recommendation 6: Cultural competence, training, and development considerations**

There are concerns highlighted in this review that calls for further training and development of staff and volunteers (all sectors) engaged in violence prevention and reduction interventions. We therefore want to see the work continue, started by the Specialist Providers in delivering training to the public sector in order to ensure that partners are aware of how to work with young people who are in gangs as well as those involved or at risk of involvement in county lines. Furthermore, supporting partners to understand the trauma that young people are dealing with every day.

### **Recommendation 7: Evidence -based, solution focus and partnership working**

All academic and evidence based research should seek to involve community researchers and organisations to establish a more community-owned approach.

Importantly, all effort should be made to work with communities, regarding solutions, so that they can be actively involved in co-producing responses to address local situations, for example in West Midlands Police Impact Areas, known for challenges and concerns regarding crime, violence and associated social issues.

It is important that consideration is given to community representation at all levels of the VRU. There needs to be representation at the VRUs most senior board to ensure community representation is fundamental to the way in which the VRU operates.

### **Recommendation 8: COVID- 19: Violence prevention, reduction and recovery interventions**

This review is being published at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions has impacted on certain violence prevention and reduction interventions. We acknowledge that during this period, serious youth violence has resulted in lives being lost and communities have been disrupted by acts of violence and criminal activities. From our conversations with statutory and community sector respondents, concerns have been highlighted about the potential of violence and crime soaring in certain areas as Covid-19 restrictions

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are lifted. With possible rise in crimes such as robbery, burglary, violence also rises in levels of youth unemployment, we strongly support a community-informed and involved partnership to respond to emerging concerns and issues. Furthermore, it is important that local communities and community organisations are informed about the implementation of the 2 reports: The Future Generations Deal and Recovery from Covid-19 and the Importance of Policing and Crime, produced by the Office of West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.

### **Methodological considerations**

The team adopted a qualitative framework, an approach, offering flexibility, for eliciting views, experiences, and perspectives from those engaged in this review. It is important to note again, whilst this review commenced pre COVID -19, a great deal of work was done during stringent government restrictions and regulations regarding face-to-face meetings and office visits. Consequently, from March 2020, the team conducted interviews, meetings and focus groups using phone communication (face time and WhatsApp), skype, zoom and Microsoft Teams.

### **Methods**

- Semi structured interviews with respondents
- Participants' written reflections /stories /thoughts and testimonials
- Desktop research and review of Commission on Gangs and Violence documents (minutes, reports, and presentations) and other associated information

### **Sensitivity issues**

We acknowledge that responses to violence, gang-affiliation, and illegal use of firearms and other weapons, which have resulted in fatalities and disrupted communities, are sensitive and emotive areas to research and review. Dickson-Swift et al. (2008 pp 1-2) say that 'qualitative research is an emotional activity and researchers need to be aware of the emotional nature of the research and anticipate the effects that it may have on them and their participants'. These were important considerations for the team, who had to have conversations with specialist providers, some of whom, during the process of this review, were involved in supporting family members who were mourning the tragic loss of young lives to gun and knife crime. Furthermore specialist providers spoke about some of the challenges faced by young people who, because of the 'street code' mentioned earlier, found themselves in fear of speaking out following violent incidents. This is mainly because of the belief that this would make them appear 'weak' or 'snitches' in areas where strength and silence are necessary to avoid further violence (Antrobus, 2009). For some, they carry the emotional scars and trauma of being perpetrators or victims of serious violence and conflicts, which without understanding, support and effective interventions, can so easily result in plans for revenge and retributions (Keir and Pinkney, 2017).

Another key issue that impacted on our interviews, more specifically with black community respondents, was the expressed pain, relating to 'black lives' being negatively impacted by racialised inequalities, which was made very real for them, as they saw, another black life cut short by 'racist policing'. For them, the inexorable grief and anger that erupted as millions witnessed the merciless

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killing of George Floyd on Monday 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, was made worse, because the act was carried out by professional police officers who were sworn to protect the individuals and communities they serve. These respondents offered honest reflections, as to their feelings about unfavourable treatment by some statutory sector providers regarding black communities and black lives in general.

This review raises concerns that have been highlighted in numerous reports and research documents, about the continued inequalities and disproportionately impacting certain communities. Whilst not new, it continues to expose some very serious gaps and omissions regarding much needed support for these communities relating to such issues as education, training, employment, criminal justice, health and wellbeing, poverty, and community safety (Anderson, 2015). Some of these concerns were raised in the Scarman Report, when some of the respondents interviewed for this review were not yet born or were youngsters at the time. What this highlights, is the crucial need for intergenerational conversations, strategies and responses, that collectively challenge actions, policies, procedures and interventions that fail to engage, empower, support and advise groups that may be labelled problematic, 'hard to reach', difficult and violent. Like other proponents for interdisciplinary and interagency partnerships, Lord Scarman was clear, about the need for joined-up working, towards developing 'healthy' communities. His report acknowledged the complex, political, criminal justice, social, cultural, racial and economic challenges, more specifically relating to 'ethnic minority communities,' in key cities across UK, which thirty nine years on, the same issues are still very pertinent within a West Midlands context. His reflections are worth quoting here:

[A] Decaying urban structure, with its attendant evils of bad-quality and inadequate housing, and lack of job opportunities, with its inevitable evil of high unemployment. These depressing conditions coexist with the crucial social fact that these areas have a high proportion of ethnic minority groups – blacks and Asians. And these groups believe and feel, with considerable justification that the colour of their skin, and their first or second-generation immigrant origins which count against them in their bid for a fair share in our society. (1982, p. xiv)

This review also acknowledges the need for violence reduction proponents, to address continued challenges and concerns regarding the disproportionate numbers of black boys and young men excluded from schools and linked to the criminal justice system (Lammy 2017, p 4). These concerns also relate to the over-representation in mental health services. We recognise that these issues have been raised by black academics and communities across the country as well as by successive governments (Robertson and Wainwright 2020).

The above highlights the need for interventions, services and partnerships that are culturally competent, community-informed and coproduced with, towards engaging communities and groups who are linked to the multiple issues and concerns highlighted. Along with the recommendations in this review, we call for

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clear strategies, approaches, and interventions, for engaging black boys and men within the education, criminal justice, and other statutory systems.

This should essentially be focussed on testing interventions, cultural competence and outcomes for black boys and men (Anderson, 2020 and Glynn, 2014), as set out in the Fairness and Belonging Plan.

### Further Data, Evidence and discussions

This review had five main questions, which are set out in the executive summary. The responses offer important insights and illuminations, from which we have offered recommendations. The recommendations have identified key areas or aspects of the Commission, requiring adjustments, reconfiguration, or amalgamation with the VRU.

From the beginning of this process, there has been an acknowledgement of the need for robust police responses, in addressing issues associated with youth violence, however we have also been clear that arrests and prosecutions would only serve as temporary solutions for symptoms, that had more fundamental and complex core issues. Based on this it was made clear that West Midlands Police could not 'arrest its way out' of the challenges facing communities relating to peer-associated violence, county lines and criminality. The call for a community-city partnership, resulted in the launch of the Commission on Gangs and Violence, as the Police and Crime Commissioner stated the following:

We need a consistent approach by the whole public sector, across different agencies to empower communities to help them tackle these issues collectively. Whilst gun crime has fallen over the last decade, if it takes place on your street it is, of course, the biggest concern in your life. We recognise that concern and, for that reason, we are coming together to launch this commission into the root causes of gangs and violent crime in the city.

We all need to work together to bring about a solution that includes skills, jobs and prosperity for the affected areas. The Commission on Gangs and Violence will be community-led, with the support of statutory agencies, not the other way around (Anderson, 2017:3).

Having had the opportunity to review the approaches and activities of the Commission, it is evident that the vision to see active community involvement, community-led responses, and the statutory sector come together, has largely been fulfilled. Some areas remain a work in progress, requiring more strategic reconfigurations to ensure that the 'Public health community-involved and community-led, accountability framework' (Anderson 2020) in Figure 2 is fully understood and implemented. In reality, the Commission should have set this work in a 10 year strategy to give the time needed to make impact on such a large scale in a realistic timescale. We further acknowledge that the implementation of

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the Commission report recommendations has been incremental, with varying degrees of reach, impact, and outcomes as represented earlier. With the WMVRU now in place, this review supports its role in the region, to be a key vehicle, in driving forward the recommendations of the Commission, ensuring the public health, community-informed and community-led responses are central to all partnerships and activities. We support the development of the long-term response that addresses the root causes of violence, which considers interventions that prevent as well as reduce youth violence, being driven through the VRU.

### **West Midlands remaining alert regarding violence and criminality**

As highlighted earlier, this review is being published at a time when there are heightened concerns regarding some resurgence of youth violence, especially relating to those between the ages of 11 and 20. The challenges, concerns and possible responses have been discussed by the different sectors (community, statutory, faith and voluntary), who are having to review and explore fresh ways to effectively address issues associated with youth violence. In a response to the brutal murder of a schoolboy in January, his devastated and heartbroken mother and her family, appealed to the community for help and support to assist in identifying the young people involved in her son's murder. A Birmingham Mail article (Staff Reporter, 2021,p.7), quoted the Deputy Chief inspector responsible for leading the investigation, who stated the following:

'...the most pointless use of extreme violence I've seen witnessed in my 24 years in the police force. The level of violence has not just caused shock to the family, but to hardened police officers. These are multiple offenders in broad day light. I simply don't believe there's not information out there that can help me with the inquiry. The answer to this investigation lies in the community'.

We have read numerous news reports about young people being linked to a wave of crimes across the city including shootings, county line activities, stabbings, robberies, and car jackings (Richardson, 2019). Along with this, the above is a stark reminder that violence (intentional and spontaneous) amongst young people sometimes will not be prevented because the 'code of the street', according to Anderson (1999), has its own cultural and nuanced approaches, protocols and understandings, which usually results in some form of conflict, loss, trauma and other related devastation. Consequently, there is need for partnerships (Statutory, faith, voluntary, health, and community), actively involved with community individuals and organisations, having lived experience and are culturally competent to address the deeper issues that are influencing young people, who live by 'the code of the streets'.

### **Crime data and its limitations**

We acknowledge that media reports and crime statistics regarding gun and knife associated crimes for victims and offenders can be misrepresented, misunderstood and, in some cases, influence a moral panic in local neighbourhoods. Furthermore, we recognise that, whilst police recorded crime statistics seek to provide essential information that seeks to understand the scale

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and severity of gun and knife crime, they do not show the whole picture. In effect, they cannot show the true or full-scale of problems associated with possession of illegal weapons as they can only capture what is reported, or they become aware of through their own operations. We also note recorded crimes are also subject to changes in recording practices, consequently it can be difficult to interpret trends in the data. Finally, numbers cannot fully reflect the impact these crimes have on individuals and communities, whether directly through injury, intimidation or loss of a loved one, or through the fear of crime that affects a community as a result of gun and knife related incidents.

We also acknowledge, there are unreported acts of violence and use of weapons that have resulted in further conflicts and trauma in families and communities, which are not officially known or registered, but are known by individuals and groups in local neighbourhoods. This report, fully acknowledges the devastation and pain caused by violence in communities, represented in the response of a community respondent:

The challenges are real for us out here in the community, we see first-hand the effect of death and destruction caused by youngsters who are 'on-what-their-on! Believe me, if you ask some of them about the future, you will hear negative and hopeless talk about 'road life', with some blatantly saying if they die 'on road', then that's what was meant to happen. I am fed-up of going to funerals of youths who have been victims of violence and street madness. All I have to say is, if we don't come together to tackle these issues it will only get worse **(Community respondent and specialist provider, C)**.

The next sections present additional and supplementary information from our data, highlighting issues, associated with the impact, effectiveness and reach of the Commission. These are represented in five discrete but interrelated themes, emerging from the review questions:

- Benefits and achievements of the Commission
- Challenges for the Commission partnership
- Sustaining community-involved/led and public health approaches
- Gaps, weaknesses, and lessons learnt
- WMVRU's implementation of the community- engaged and led approaches developed by the Commission

### Theme 1: Benefits and achievements of the Commission

The West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner is acknowledged to have championed, what is acknowledged as an active community involved and community led Commission on Gangs and Violence in Birmingham. The Commission was proactive in developing new and fresh approaches, as well as



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building on some existing strategies, towards addressing gang related challenges and youth violence.

A recurring theme in the data is the reference made to community-involvement and leadership, in gaining perspectives and insights from organisations that were connected to local neighbourhoods. According to two statutory sector commission partners, the following are pertinent:

The launch of the commission and subsequent report was powerful and offered the partnership the capacity to address the different issues regarding gangs and violence with shared understandings and approaches with the benefit of visible community leadership **(Statutory Commission Respondent, A)**.

Good to get like-minded people around the table; Welcomed having community voices around the table; Helped to encourage collaboration and offered an extra impetus to addressing such complex and sometimes very difficult issues and challenges **(Statutory Commission Respondent, H)**.

The support for the Commission was evident from all sectors interviewed. Some Specialist Providers said how much welcomed the opportunity to have been involved in meetings and discussions that were not usually afforded to them. The following are statements from two of these respondents:

Although I have been in meetings about some difficult issues facing our communities, I believe the Commission was one of the first groups that gave me the opportunity to be with other likeminded community groups as well as people from 'the system', to plan together to make a difference in the lives of the youths and families who are affected by the evils of violence, that is still challenging for us, who are dealing with these issues on a regular basis **(Community respondent and Specialist Provider, C)**.

A community respondent, involved in one of the projects funded through one of the youth intervention recommendations, stated the following:

A great opportunity to use my skills, in offering services that has the potential to change lives. Although it can be crazy out here, I believe if we truly work together to help the youths, some change is possible. For me the Commission needs to be the voice for those who need help in communities dealing with the madness relating to the violence we continue to see amongst our youths. In all honesty, there needs to be more resources for organisations to do the work- We need more of us out here, who understand what's happening. **(Community respondent, G)**

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Along with the above, the following emerged from the data:

- In line with the community-involved and community-led approach, repeatedly highlighted in this review, of note, are the two examples of community, commission respondents, being involved as stakeholder panel members, for the appointment of the interim West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit Director (2018), the appointment of the Director, and the appointment of two Assistant Chief Constables for West Midlands Police (2020).
- The Police and Crime Commissioner maintained his connection to the Commission, with regular reminders regarding the need for sustainable community-led and community-involved contributions and activities.
- In implementing some recommendations, there were appointment of workers, to respond to community networking and development issues (two community development workers and a community facilitator were commissioned), fund raising for the work of the Commission and engagement with schools relating to exclusions and addressing behavioural issues. These are clearly represented in the delivery and implementation strategies, presented at Commission meetings and to the Strategic Policing and Crime Board by the Deputy Chief Executive from the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner.
- Commission community representatives presented and contributed to discussions at the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime Summit with the West Midlands Violence Prevention Alliance in 2019.
- The West Midlands Police Cadet Scheme now has up to twelve units across the West Midlands, with nearly 500 cadets, ages 13-17 from a diverse range of backgrounds and many of the young people engaged coming from our Impact areas.
- In line with a key recommendations of the Commission, the VRU successfully commissioned several community organisations to implement targeted resettlement and support service for younger adults (to age 30) identified as either gang members or who are associated with serious violence and criminality, resettling in Birmingham from custody or those recently released from custody. As a result of the commissioning process, two key community partnerships who were successful, namely the Young Adult, 'Inside Out', Community Resettlement Services (18-30) and Choices Resettlement Programme (12-18) are presently being evaluated. The evaluation, commissioned by the VRU is being undertaken by a partnership between the University of Wolverhampton, Birmingham Voluntary Services Council (BVSC), the University of Birmingham, and Community Researchers, a partnership led by Professor Laura Caulfield (Wolverhampton) and Sophie Wilson (BVSC). The evaluation is anticipated to benefit projects, stakeholders and service providers. We understand that, the evaluation is both formative and summative, covering programme delivery, impact and achievement of objectives. In particular, the evaluation focuses on providing evidence of what works - and what has been learnt - that can be used to influence future work and decisions in future commissioning (Caulfield and Wilson, 2020).

## Theme 2: Challenges for the Commission partnership

Following the launch of the Commission on Gangs and Violence Report in 2017, the aim was for Commission partners to ensure that the governance structures were in place to implement recommendations from the report. The report had the following recommendation:

The Gangs and Violence Commission should continue meeting quarterly to monitor, review and scrutinise the implementation process and progress related to the recommendations in the report. Importantly, the commission should agree priorities and time frames for implementation of the recommendations. Furthermore, the commission should establish a community/city-led implementation group who will ensure delivery of the recommendations approved in the report (Anderson, 2017)

Whilst seeing a clear recommendation regarding governance and implementation, the data highlights that there were several challenges associated with communication, consistency and keeping the partnership accountable. Importantly, we acknowledge that there may have been unrealistic expectations from partners, regarding the timeframe for the commission to implement its recommendations, which from reviewing the 'Scottish Model', should be considered within a ten-year plan. We also noted that the Commission was constituted with individuals (community, statutory, faith and voluntary sectors), having other major roles and responsibilities, consequently, consistent commitment to Commission meetings and activities became challenging. We also recognise that, partners were not always updated as to the progress of the Commission, which we believe may have resulted in some diminishing of the enthusiasm that was present at the launch of the Commission and its subsequent report launch.

Based on our data, we also acknowledge the following:

- The Commission had undertaken numerous community-involved conversations and had implemented pioneering activities, led by community groups that were known to have had positive impact, yet was not always communicated to partners and the wider community.

A statutory sector respondent stated:

We were not always clear about the progress being made on the recommendations and what areas may have been falling behind, and therefore needed more attention; For different reasons, I think momentum was lost at some stage. I suppose we should have asked, whether the Commission had served its purpose and had come to phase that needed another framework to ensure that the implementation of all recommendations and the activities of the Commission were always in focus **(Statutory Commission Respondent, H).**

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- Concerns were highlighted by community and statutory partners, regarding the need for a more diverse community organisations on the Commission, given that the majority of Specialist Providers were from a black Caribbean background.

A statutory sector respondent stated:

There may be some caution or hesitancy relating to different races and communities coming together around the issues associated to gangs and serious violence. There may need to be more upfront communication and publicity, stating that all communities are impacted in some way by crime and violence **(Statutory Commission Respondent, B)**.

The diversity concerns were highlighted by several community respondents. One had the following to say:

Following our contribution to the first commission report in 2017, we highlighted the need to have groups around the table who are able to deal with the issues of communities where marginalised young people and families from Pakistani, Sikh, Hindu, Yemeni and Somalian backgrounds. There has to be more effort to get local organisations around the table who understand these groups so that we can plan together to deal with the challenges in our local areas **(Community respondent and specialist provider, F)**.

Multiple efforts were made to get members of various communities involved in the work of the Commission, which was faced with hesitation and some scepticism about the intention and motivation for a Commission on Gangs and Violence. There was also acknowledgement that, although most Specialist Providers were black, they engaged with different communities and people from diverse backgrounds.

- Placed- based and diversionary activities were implemented with active participation from up to 26 community groups and personnel. We note these were short term funded activities, which raises continued concerns regarding the need for long-term and sustained interventions.

A statutory sector respondent acknowledged the above challenge, stating that:

I understand why people criticising the level of funding, however, they have to realise that, for example, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) gets funding from the Home Office on an annual basis, which presents a challenge regarding commitment to funding projects on a longer term basis. The OPCC is aware of this and are in continued conversations and lobbying of government, regarding sustainability needs of critical projects, like those funded to engage in diversionary activities **(Statutory Commission Respondent, C)**.

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- There was agreement that, all recommendations from the report would have a statutory and community partner leading on its implementation and progress. We note that, this was not always the case and because of the limited and sometimes, irregular whole commission meetings, there were struggles.

A statutory sector respondent suggested that:

Governance and strategies could have been more robust, with a logic model and theoretical framework, that is evidenced-based. This would support the partnership, around commissioning, on short, medium- and long-term goals or projects, that informs funding decisions that could be linked to an agreed evidence and outcome matrix. Without the full engagement of all relevant statutory partners, working actively with community organisations, these challenges will continue. **(Statutory Commission Respondent, C.)**

Having noted the above, we note that there was a consistent timetable of meetings up until December 2019. The intention at that point was to conduct the review for handover to the VRU in March 2020. The VRU has those structures and mechanisms that have been highlighted above and would ensure continuity. From March 2020 the COVID- 19 pandemic seriously disrupted much of the activities of the Commission, as set out in the review earlier.

### **Theme 3: Sustaining Community-involved/led, public health approaches**

The review team noted that, there were several recommendations in the Commission's report, referring to community-led and involved approaches as well as agreement to develop a broad, preventative public health plan. We acknowledge that, although community respondents were positive about the initiative in the initial stages, some expressed concerns about lack of consistent and active support for community voices to be represented in the decision making at key strategic tables. In effect, these respondents raised questions regarding how seriously their contributions were taken and whether their insights were central to plans and strategies relating to violence reduction in the region?

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One community respondent suggested the following:

If we are serious about ensuring all stakeholders understand the need for implementing community-involved/led and public health approaches, then there must be consistent communication, training, and conversations about these approaches. This should not just be left up to the few, to champion this but, for example, getting religious leaders to step forward and be counted for their role in reducing violence in their communities. If they are not aware of how public health and faith are connected, this is where opportunities for joint training and learning can take place. From my perspective, I have seen mainly the black churches stepped forward to be accounted. Where are the other faiths? Do we have to wait for a calamity to happen in their communities before they step forward? This knee jerk reaction has been a big challenge when trying to work across diverse communities **(Community respondent and specialist provider, E).**

Another community respondent had this to say:

We need representation across all communities to help in tackling the challenges we face- The statistics on victims and perpetrators does not only represent black youths, but we see them represented a lot in media images. I am fed up of this! Where are the other community groups whose youngsters are also involved in acts of crime and violence? We need to do something about this! As a commission we need to create genuine alternatives for young people involved in the life of crime – e.g. viable employment / training - alternative paths with incentives **(Community respondent and specialist provider, A).**

Whilst there are continued discussions regarding what ‘true community participation’ and ‘authentic community engagement’, involves, one community respondent had this to say:

For me, community-led and community-informed approaches must relate to organisations like ourselves, representing the real voices and feelings of individuals and families who are impacted by criminality, gangs, and violence. From this, we can then lead on developing ways to support them. Once we know what the challenges are, we can then work with different agencies to address the deeper issues. We in the community are fed-up of hearing about groups and agencies without knowledge or relationships at local community levels, being funded to offer services, this does not work because these groups are not trusted **(Community respondent and Specialist Provider, B).**

The above respondent’s statement supports research, highlighting that, communities, and community-led organisations that partners with statutory and other support sectors, regarding issues of concern, have a greater possibility of finding effective solutions. This is because, for example, those who are impacted by social or community concerns, are more likely to contribute with others who

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are seeking to identify what needs to change and respond with possible solutions (Crisp et al., 2016; Dailly and Barr, 2008 ). In an interview regarding youth violence, Anne Longfield, Children’s Commissioner for England, reiterates the need for active and joined- up partnerships, to tackle serious violence in neighbourhoods. She stated:

Tragically, until there is this joined-up public health response to gangs that identifies and helps all those children at risk as early as possible, teenagers will keep dying on our streets. (Pyman, 2021).

We acknowledge that the above context requires a whole system approach, which involves application of thinking, methods and practice, towards gaining a better understanding of public health, community-involved approaches, to collectively respond to the complexities of violence related issues and challenges. Again, we reiterate that this should be considered within frameworks that are long term and sustainable. A statutory sector respondent highlighted the following:

It is important for us to ensure that the hard work of the Commission, developing approaches that have truly engaged communities, is not lost, or minimised because of political changes, be it national, regional or local. The journey we have taken in the West Midlands has highlighted joined up approaches, impacting on how we strategise and respond to gangs and serious violence **(Statutory Commission Respondent, C)**.

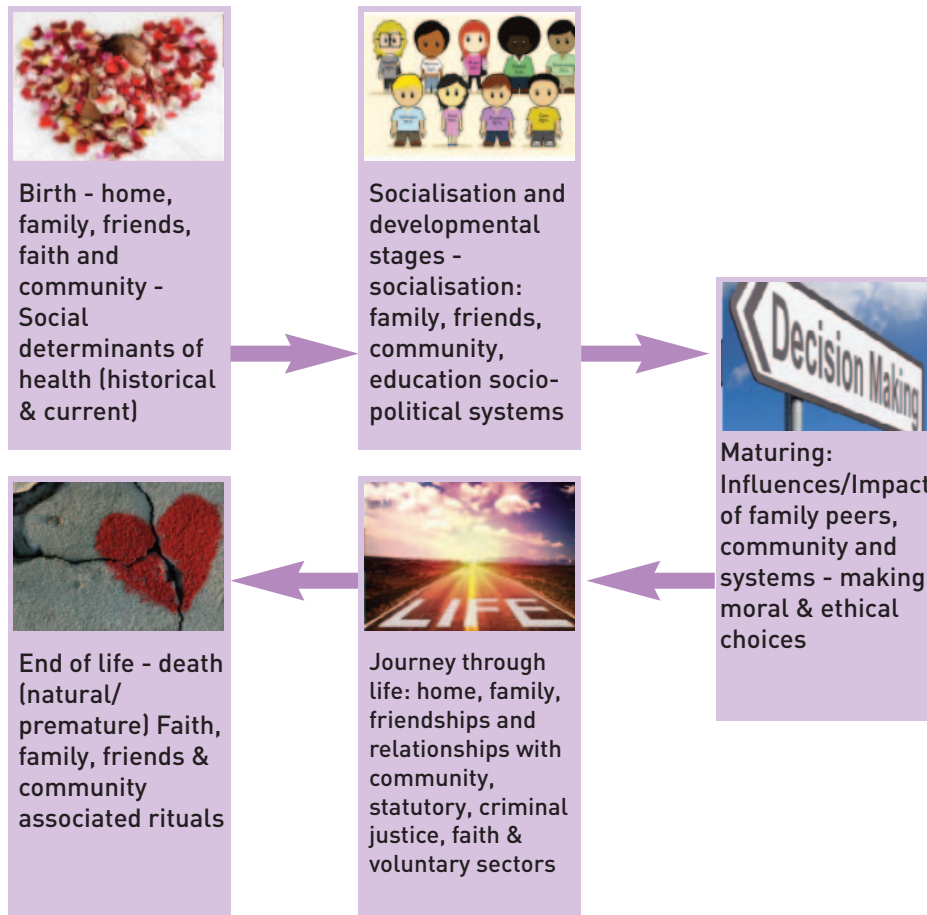
For me, I would not say there were any gaps because the journey of the Commission was one of pioneering something new, however, I believe we could learn from the process and reconfigure aspects we have learnt from. This will help us to be sharper for the next stage and phase, for working together, to effectively engage communities and get them on our side in the fight against serious violence **(Statutory sector Commission respondent, A)**

As the VRU develops its community-involved approaches, building on the models of the Commission, we are aware of their continuing conversations regarding the implementation of key recommendations highlighted in the Commission’s report, in particular ones that seek to strengthen community-involved and community-led approaches. As a result of the continuation of the work, a focus group meeting with the Minister of State for Crime and Policing, Kit Malthouse took place relating to the way in which the faith communities and VRU are working together to reduce violence (Hussain, 2020).

Based on our evidence from this review and research already undertaken, we suggest that a public health and community-informed and community-led framework has the capacity to offer support or interventions at any or all stages of life cycle perspective below.

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**Figure 3  
 Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Life Cycle Perspective (Anderson 2017)**





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### Theme 4: Gaps and lessons learnt

There is much learning from this review which also highlights some areas which should be considered as lessons for future strategies. Those strategies will be developed and maintained. The following issues were identified, mainly from interview data from respondents, as well as reviewing minutes, relevant reports, and presentation documents:

- The Commission lacked a diverse mix of ethnicities and communities, even though statistics had highlighted that both victims and preparators were across racial and cultural groups and communities.
- The need for a more robust consistent communication strategy was identified to ensure the Commission's role, responsibilities, funding streams, activities, progress, and impact were known by partners or stakeholders and wider community networks.
- Short-term funding remains problematic. These issues are entrenched, historic and complex and requires a whole system approach which seeks to consider sustainable solutions. Based on this, we have already recommended a joint response regarding long term and sustainable funding for impact areas, areas that have the greatest level of need.
- Delivery of some of the recommendations was perceived by some community respondent and organisations to be slow and involving too much 'red tape'. This required clearer information regarding funding procedures, protocols, and processes, timeframes and requirements, relating to the national, regional, and local context. Importantly, it was community groups and organisations who raised concerns in this area, with some of them struggling to survive in what for them, has become a highly competitive 'funding world'.
- Not all relevant statutory partners were engaged, for e.g. Housing and Children's Services. Given the need to develop a whole systems approach, further work is needed in this area. This has been acknowledged in the partnership structures of the VRU which will lead to improvements.
- The monitoring and evaluation of the projects and interventions should have been shared wider and organisations held to account more robustly for delivery. We were looking for impact and outcomes but it has to be acknowledged that it is difficult to strategise long term with short-term funding. This leads to reactive activity, dealing only with the immediate problem. We are looking for long-term change and the VRU has evaluation built into its foundations and therefore this will become clearer as we they get more established. It has been difficult to establish impact, reach and changes made.

The issues above are highlighted in order that we address them accordingly. We note the thoughts of a senior statutory sector respondent here:

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For me, I would not say there were any gaps because the journey of the Commission was one of pioneering something new, however, I believe we could learn from the process and reconfigure aspects we have learnt from. This will help us to be sharper for the next stage and phase, for working together, to effectively engage communities and get them on our side in the fight against serious violence **(Statutory sector Commission respondent, A)**

### Theme 5: The VRU's implementation of the community- engaged and led approaches developed by the Commission

Whilst several newly established Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) have sought to mirror the positive work undertaken by the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit which was established in 2005, we are concerned that the Home Office is still hesitant to confirm long-term funding support, although it mentions the need in much of their documentation. We believe there is an urgency, for having relevant policies and procedures, supporting long term support for organisations, like the VRU, who are tasked to develop sustainable partnership solutions, to prevent and reduce violence in communities. In supporting this, we believe the VRU has the opportunity to develop and sustain whole system, public health and authentic community-involved and engaged approaches. Consequently, this review has recommended a collective request to the relevant government department, regarding the need for sustainable support. Given the seriousness of the issues raised in this review , and likelihood of further violence and conflicts in some of the 19 West Midlands Police Impact Areas, there is a critical need for effective and sustainable interagency and multisector partnerships that address root causes of youth violence. Importantly, the Home Office appears to be in agreement, suggesting that:

Tackling serious violence is not only a law enforcement issue, as we need a multi-agency approach involving a range of partners and agencies such as education, health, social services, housing, youth and victim services. It is also vital that public agencies work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector to develop targeted interventions in local communities. Action should be guided by evidence of the problems and what works in tackling their root causes. To do this, we must bring organisations together to share information, data and intelligence and encourage them to work in concert rather than in isolation. (Home Office, 2019,p.3).

The review data highlights evidence, from both statutory and community sector partners, that the effective practices and lessons learnt from the Commission on Gangs and Violence, should be incorporated into strategies and conversations, towards supporting a whole system approach regarding violence reduction across the West Midlands.

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For a senior statutory sector respondent, they stated the following, supporting the need for continued active community participation within a VRU context:

The community leadership was significant for the Gangs and Violence Commission to move in the direction it did. I believe the members around the table were there because they felt they could genuinely make a difference with issue around serious violence in communities they were active in. They showed an ability and capacity to connect to some of the real challenges we wanted to address. This was evident in how they were able gain and represent relevant voices of those impacted by violence and criminality, for the Commission on Gangs Report in 2017. We now have the opportunity for the skill and expertise of community organisations to influence the work of the WMVRU **(Statutory Commission Respondent, H)**.

This review acknowledges that, overall, the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner's Commission on Gangs and Violence has pioneered significant approaches and interventions that, should they be amalgamated within the VRU, will significantly contribute to their community-involved and community-led processes and methods. At the same time, we acknowledge that the VRU has commenced implementing and commissioning against some of the 24 recommendations in the commission report.

### **Strength, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities (SWOT ) synopsis**

This review highlights a generally a positive picture about the Commission on Gangs and Violence, acknowledging the initiative to be creative, pioneering and genuinely community informed. We have considered five key questions, with responses represented under several headings, above. We acknowledge the need for honest reflections, regarding the strengths, weaknesses , threats, and opportunities (SWOT) of this initiative, if a model of 'best practice' is to be established and maintained. Importantly, as stated previously, the review data highlights the need for sustainable and accountable community-led and informed partnerships and interventions that supports violence prevention and reduction. Whilst recognising that violence reduction and criminality has a law enforcement element, this review reiterates the need to ensure that law enforcement approaches and operations are culturally competent (e.g. capacity and ability to effectively respond and interact with people/communities of different cultures and socio-economic and criminal backgrounds).

This review proposes some clear recommendations as the work transitions. Furthermore, it highlights factors that, it deems to be pertinent for any reconfigurations and amalgamations within the structures and processes of the VRU.

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### Conclusion and moving the agenda forward

Since the launch of the Commission on Gangs and Violence in 2016 and the production of their report 'Uniting for Safety' with 24 recommendations, they have progressed to develop and embed a community-informed and community-led approach to addressing issues associated with negative gang activities and violence. The contributions of community organisations, through the work of Specialist Providers, who were responsible for obtaining the voices or lived experience narratives from community individuals and families, have been the driving force, towards the Commission being truly community informed. It is from this informed position, the Commission continued to work towards implementing its recommendations as previously mentioned. During this review, we have had the opportunity to read numerous reports and research documents, exploring causes and solutions regarding negative gang activities and serious violence. We have highlighted some of those findings in this review, some of which have been built on by the Commission.

Importantly, this review has brought into focus the pioneering community-involved and community-led approach of the Commission, which was a significant factor in the successful application for a West Midlands VRU. We are encouraged to see evidence of interactions and reconfigurations relating to the continued implementation of the recommendations in the Commission's report. We are clear that without the involvement of community groups and organisations, partnering with statutory sector personnel, solutions that emerged would have lacked community credibility and grassroots effectiveness, which was reiterated by both statutory and community respondents.

We continue to be encouraged by the emphasis of respondents, regarding community-involved and community-led approaches, which we believe, can positively impact on the work of the VRU. The report confirms the willingness of the different sectors in the Commission partnership to work together in addressing the challenges linked to serious violence. It also notes the clear, local, regional, and national acknowledgements that arrests and law enforcement approaches are not enough to effectively confront and reduce serious violence in local neighbourhoods or communities. It is from these acknowledgements that this report confirms that only an active and sustained multi-agency, city-community response to the recommendations will make any significant inroads into youth related crimes and violence.

Having reviewed the journey of the Commission on Gangs and Violence, it is clear there has been some significant outcomes and learning, which can inform key stakeholders and proponents of violence reduction in the West Midlands.

Finally, we conclude that each sector involved in addressing the concerns raised in this review, will require approaches that are culturally competent which according to Cross et al. (1989) and Goode (2004), considers the following factors:

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- Valuing diversity in local neighbourhoods/communities.
- Willingness to conduct internal self-assessments regarding competence of staff and organisation to effectively engage with community issues and concerns.
- Practicing principles of community engagement that result in the reciprocal transfer of knowledge and skills.
- Acquiring and institutionalising cultural knowledge and awareness for effective community engagement.
- Developing structures and strategies to ensure consumer and community participation in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the organisation's core functions, especially its service to local communities.

This review highlights some key observations and offers recommendations in response to them. As stated earlier, we are very conscious that there are no easy solutions or quick fixes for addressing the complexities associated with violence prevention and reduction.

### **Response from the VRU by the Director, Clare Gollop**

Too many of our cities young people carry with them a significant daily burden of safety planning, adapt their ambition in order to survive, know the sounds of a gunshot or have seen the flash of a blade. This is not the way that any of us – parents, older siblings, teachers, police officers, nurses, community leaders, elected officials, surgeons, neighbours, youth workers, faith leaders, and of course, the young people themselves – want it to be.

The Commission is recognised as an excellent example of people coming together from a range of disciplines and backgrounds in order to make it more likely that the collective offer from civil society can rival that of the street. In communities that are beset with disadvantage and the impact of layer on layer of inequities, this is no mean feat. It is clear that the passion, grit, and determination of community working together is indeed both a force to be reckoned with, and the strongest asset that the city has. We pick up this baton with real respect for the foundation work that the Commission has laid.

The VRU is a multi-agency unit funded by the Home Office, with a system-wide remit to bring together partners from across the statutory, youth services, and community sectors in order to prevent violence. Established in the autumn of 2019, it has been operational for eighteen months – a year of which has been under pandemic conditions. The VRU has now three times received short-term, annual funding arrangements, and I echo strongly the calls from the Commission for sustained funding, at a level and for a duration that enables us to tackle this generational challenge.

Sustainability though, comes not just from longer term centralised funding. The network of partners that stand together within the VRU are also working to align their resources to work more effectively on this issue, using the existence of the VRU as an opportunity to explore new ways of working and taking steps to lock in the changes that have impact positively on the context. In Birmingham in

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particular, I am heartened by the partnerships recent commitment to developing and to delivering a ten year violence prevention strategy, and by the police and local authorities steps towards more place-based ways of working, which enable us to focus in on issues affecting a hyper-local community.

The public health approach to violence prevention begins first with improving the data and evidence about the underlying causes of violence. With the help of the VRU partners, we have been able to move the discussion on from looking only at the locations where violence takes place – important though these are – to identify the areas where risk factors that contribute to the likelihood of involvement in violence are increasing. In those areas, there is the opportunity to stop the cycle of violence before it begins – and to take our most preventative action.

A snapshot of the developing, shared evidence base is within our strategic needs assessment, which is available at <https://westmidlands-vru.org/app/uploads/2020/07/Strategic-Needs-Assessment-WM-VRU-April-2020.pdf>. I am drawn to the sections of this where community voices described their experience of living and working in two of the areas we have prioritised working this year – in Lozells and in Three Estates. This is a step towards the strengths based approach advocated by the commission, as are the partnership hypothesis testing approaches that we have begun to use to help us see from those closest to the situations the context behind the data. I acknowledge there is much more to do to enhance the way that lived experience and qualitative data inform decision makers across the system.

In an effort to influence more evidence-based commissioning by both local and national funders, and to support smaller, community-based organisations to bid more effectively for funds, we are currently launching an interactive open access data platform that draws together a range of risk factor information. We hope this will help local providers in their design and delivery of projects, and will complement the online directory of youth services in the region that can now be found at [www.youthmap.uk](http://www.youthmap.uk). Given the rapid regular adaptation of services during the pandemic, we paused refining this directory further during 20/21, but can work with the commission to do so in line with your recommendations about capacity building. Nurturing the growth of a stronger ecosystem of local providers, and enhancing cultural competence, trust, and effective working between statutory and non-statutory actors is key.

We have deliberately moved the centre of gravity for the VRUs activity closer to our priority places –the areas where the risk of violence is highest – during the course of this year. With the help of a team of community navigators, nine place-based projects across the region have taken place, and our ambition is that these will expand both to other areas and in terms of broader inclusion in each place this coming year. In Birmingham, this work took place in Lozells and on Three Estates, and – in the absence of the ability to gather easily as a community – much of the work has been delivered through a virtual stakeholder network involving those who work, live, or deliver services in the area. My thanks to all

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who have participated in these networks, and have brought local challenges to the partnership table to work through together.

It has been reassuring to see more trusted relationships and collaborations beginning to develop within the stakeholder networks - and to see statutory partners consulting on changes to services or to ways in which they deliver their function in the area. Our ambition is very much to grow these networks to become more inclusive of wider community actors; I note the strength of the recommendations within the report about this. In the VRU pilots elsewhere in the region that have been going just a little longer, networks of community champions have been established, and I would welcome the commissions challenge and support to get us to this position within the city.

The legacy of both the commission and the Violence Prevention Alliance included a very strong focus on protecting access to education and on the importance of promoting inclusion. We have sought to expand on this – influencing policy through commissioning research such as the Rewriting Futures report [https://www.revealingreality.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/RR\\_WMVRU\\_Rewriting-futures\\_final-report.pdf](https://www.revealingreality.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/RR_WMVRU_Rewriting-futures_final-report.pdf); providing practice advice in relation to vulnerability as part of the education sectors covid response; bringing together leaders from the education system in networks and learning events; and by placing education intervention advisers inside each local authority inclusion team.

The Birmingham EIAs are able to support schools across the city - with a focus on those where the school communities' risk factors are highest - through the commissioning of both targeted and universal interventions and by delivering a consistent focus on identifying vulnerability and the causes of situations that may lead to exclusion. They are also supporting other partners to work with the education sector more effectively – most notably steering the uplift in schools based officers within WMP and in raising the profile of the importance of the support that is delivered through alternative provision.

Together with work to establish trauma informed schools and colleges, the delivery of Mentors in Violence Prevention, and work across both education and criminal justice systems linked to speech, language and communication challenges, the education delivery team are well placed to continue the commissions endeavour to ensure young people are not pushed towards exploitation through exclusion.

During the pandemic, the proportion of very vulnerable young people being referred into our sports diversionary impact programme deliberately rose significantly – and with it came the need to better equip our providers to support young people through incredibly complex challenges. The VRUs offer pivoted to capacity building; raising awareness of specific types of harm and strengthening referral pathways. This model offers an opportunity to explore the commission's proposals to build cultural competency amongst a broader network in the future.

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The VRU has funded interventions that provide an off-ramp away from violence for young people in a range of situations: in accident and emergency departments; in alternative provision or at risk of exclusion; in police custody or entering a police investigation; on leaving prison or the secure estate and after referrals from other statutory partners. Annual external funding is far from ideal. In parallel to delivery we have been supporting partners to develop the evidence base, as a step towards making this a part of mainstream funding. We will continue that effort, alongside both local partners and with central government.

The VRU family is a network of networks – a constellation of interested parties. Our goal is that the violence reduction system becomes self-sustaining, and is not dependent upon the VRUs existence. Surrounding the core VRU team, a number of thematic groups offer the opportunity for people to come together: the exploitation boards; sports strategic partnership board; faith alliance; force tasking processes; education steering group. Each CSP now has a dedicated forum to consider their local violence reduction activity and I anticipate that Birmingham's operational and strategic boards will be well placed to take forward with us some of the commission's suggestions.

The commissions call for representation within the VRUs most senior board echo the encouragement from the Home Office and other partners that this board is reviewed. A new term of reference has been proposed and is being considered by existing members. This includes a move towards a broader communications and engagement strategy both across and within the partnership.

We have sought to improve community engagement and youth voice activity by the VRU partners, convening over the course of the year a number of opportunities for young people, parents and providers to influence both national and local decision makers. A group of young people have supported us to develop a youth engagement framework in order to enable all agencies to interact more effectively. We are currently piloting this through engagement on a topic that has come up frequently in our conversations with young people – access to and support for mental health challenges. Over the coming year, particularly as restrictions ease, we look forward to more sustained and direct youth engagement across the network.

Alongside this, we have sought to strengthen and promote the importance of recognising the family-wide impacts of serious violence, expanding a parenting peer support project that was piloted in Sandwell into Birmingham, and encouraging statutory partners to consider the broader context around a young person who has become involved in serious violence or exploitation.

We have worked closely with the EmpowerU hub to raise awareness, and through our tackling exploitation boards have supported organisations to build and to deliver organisational workforce awareness and training proposals. The recent intensive period of action against criminal exploitation was co-developed with a range of statutory agencies and specialist providers – and its success has undoubtedly bred opportunities for more collectively shaped action in the future.



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Our goal is to prevent violence, and much of our energy focuses on longer term activity. But we cannot ignore the high levels of harm that are occurring now. On a community's worst day, the VRU is increasingly supporting the agencies who have a statutory responsibility and remit to respond, and aiding them to do so in a way which prevents the next violent act from occurring. We have worked alongside health, local authority and police decision makers to increase engagement with those most affected by violent acts, and made available support for those who have witnessed or been rocked by its impacts, but do not meet the threshold for other agencies to engage.

Statutory organisations have a responsibility to prepare to work together effectively in response to critical incidents, such as a train crash; but they do not have the same encouragement to prepare for the overwhelming impacts on a community of acts of serious violence. Birmingham CSP are leading the country in committing to develop a serious violence community resilience plan. This is an encouraging step towards ensuring that the actions of all partners pull towards the prevention of further harm, in a way which is influenced by community voices. Criminal justice outcomes are important, but must not be the only thing we focus on in relation to this issue that threatens the very fabric of our society.

The commission has provided the VRU family with a strong foundation. Alongside the recommendations this report conveys a number of principles for approaches to operating that we will hold close as we all move forward together. For that insight, I am hugely grateful to all members of the commission.

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