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Report title: Drug Gangs, Knife Crime and County Lines Report response	
Report to: People and Families Scrutiny Committee	
Report author: Cllr Dick Madden, Cabinet Member Performance, Business Planning and Partnerships	
Date: 6 January 2021	For: Review and Feedback
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

Purpose of Report

The People and Families Scrutiny Committee set up a Task and Finish Group in response to a request from Full Council to ensure that ECC had oversight of the development of multi-agency working to confront the issue of drug gangs, knife crime and County Lines in Essex.

The report, "Drug gangs, knife crime and county lines" was published in September 2020 and the purpose of this paper is to provide an initial response to the 8 recommendations published in this report for the People and Families Committee to review.

As the committee will be aware, shortly after the publication of this report, Essex (excluding Thurrock and Southend) went into Tier 2 and then into the national pre-Christmas restrictions with a move into Tier 4 across the county. Since then we are now in a new national lockdown announced in early January. This has impacted on education, youth work provision and the re-focusing of efforts in the immediate short term by the Skills and Education and Children and Families Portfolios on supporting vulnerable families, children and schools in response to government restrictions.

This has necessarily impacted on our delivery of services and as a result, some of the recommendations may not have been progressed as far as they might have been. The committee are asked to be aware that this is not because of a lack of willingness or commitment by officers or the portfolio holders, but a reflection of the re-shaping of our services in extraordinary times.

Recommendations

That the People and Families Scrutiny Committee review the report and provide feedback to the Cabinet Member for Performance, Business Planning & Partnerships on the responses contained in the report.

That the People and Families Scrutiny Committee recognise the impact that Covid-19 and the impact that this has had on ECC and other partners' responses to the recommendations contained in this report.

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Increasing prevention and intervention

Recommendation 1 (page 14) (Owner Cllr Gooding)– that further consideration be given to:

- (i) identifying the gaps in educational provision for young people on the periphery of exclusion;**
- (ii) finding further alternative options to support schools dealing with behavioural problems instead of exclusion and, where a young person has been excluded, that there is resource allocated to facilitate a safe return to formal education;**
- (iii) encouraging schools to minimise the number of young people being excluded and to sign-up to the Inclusion Policy if they have not already done so;**
- (iv) requiring schools to clearly demonstrate which steps they took before escalating the intervention to an exclusion;**
- (v) support a process whereby schools continue to be held accountable for the educational attainment and welfare of permanently excluded pupils;**
- (vi) resources being made available to schools to facilitate the safe return to school following an exclusion.**
- (vii) having clearer oversight of the off-rolling process at schools and encouraging clearer and comprehensive guidance being available to parents and carers contemplating off-rolling.**
- (viii) reviewing the current provision of the Pupil Referral Unit and look to expand this closer to a full-time syllabus.**

In response to the recommendations we have further developed several work streams that are aiming to support young people to engage in fulltime attendance at a suitable education setting. It is ECC's view that the key response to preventing engagement in gangs and violent activity is a suitable fulltime education offer.

We are currently running a workstream aimed at reviewing and redesigning the offer to all young people "Not In Full Time Education" (NIFTE). This work stream is looking at all provision that does not offer full time education.

This work is broken down into phases:-

- Discovery
- Visioning
- Planning
- Implementation

Discovery

We have completed the discovery phase, which was a review of all current provision, research into other offers in other counties. A review of best practice across the sector and a consultation with key stakeholders including pupils and their families.

Visioning

We are currently in the visioning stage where we are engaging with key stakeholders to agree what we would like the future landscape to look like. We want to capture views on what a best offer will look like. This will help us identify the gaps in educational provision for young people on the periphery of exclusion;

Planning

Once we have completed the visioning phase, we intend engage with colleagues to design and plan the new offer for young people. This will help us find further alternative options to support schools dealing with behavioural problems instead of exclusion and, where a young person has been excluded, that there is resource allocated to facilitate a safe return to formal education;

Implementation

This phase will be where we put in place the new offer to young people to ensure we are meeting the needs of all young people in Essex. While this work is underway, we are talking to schools and other key stakeholders to push home the inclusion message. We are also leading on several initiatives in place to support schools to reduce exclusions. Including the development of Trauma Perceptive Practice (TPP). The vision in Essex is for all schools to embrace TPP. It is the Essex approach to understanding behaviour and supporting emotional wellbeing. It will become the core offer to schools at the universal level of support.

We now challenge all permanent exclusions to ensure the schools have exhausted all avenues to avoid exclusion. We have communicated with schools a strong message that the rules around exclusions must be followed and we will support wherever possible.

As a result of our engagements we have had 55 permanent exclusions this year as opposed to 92 in this period last year.

Alongside this activity we are carrying out a full review of PRU's commissioning and funding with a view to ensuring that we have a more consistent and relevant offer.

Recommendation 2 (page 17) (Owner Cllr Gooding):

That a more visible comprehensive directory of locally available youth services and support groups should be available including those initiatives commissioned and funded by the Office of the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner (through the Violence and Vulnerability Unit).

The VVU has been in close contact with many organisations in Essex such as the local community foundation, CVSs, local councils, ECVYS who have all been running listening pieces of work with adults, young people and organisations in Essex around how Covid has affected them and their lives/ organisations. The VVU has facilitated funding streams to help address the issues that have arisen due to Covid and to support groups at this time. Community groups are engaged through the VVU's dedicated workstream 'Voice of the Community' which is focused on community engagement through voluntary organisations and asking them to have a say on our approach.

In Essex there is an extensive network of community groups and the key for the VU and others has been finding the organisations in the voluntary sector that have the networks and communication to make the most of these already existing networks. Within ECC, engagement with community groups who will allow us to reach all parts of our community has been through the Equalities & Partnerships Team and their work through the Essex Partners Board.

The Essex Council for Voluntary Youth Services (which represents over 220,000 children and young people in voluntary youth clubs in our area), Essex CVS network, multi-school's council, Active Essex, CSPs, local youth organisations including The Red Balloon foundation, Essex Boys and Girls clubs, Chelmsford Diocese, Pact for Autism and The Children's Society East are engaged in this work. We also have statutory partners engaging with this group from local councils, the police, youth offending services - to enhance communication and join up conversations around safety and vulnerabilities that we can help action together.

The VVU is in the final stages of planning its first annual report which will show where progress has been made which will further update this work.

Recommendation 3 (page 18): (Owner HOSC Scrutiny Chairman)

That the Health Overview Policy and Scrutiny Committee consider reviewing the impact of the public health approach to drug gangs, knife crime and county lines as part of its regular scrutiny of public health activity in Essex.

No update provided as part of this report as this has been tasked to the HOSC Scrutiny Chair.

Recommendation 4 (page 18) (Owner Cllr Madden):

- (i) The Group supports the work being done with London Boroughs to investigate developing a broader informative notification process and sharing interim support costs;**
- (ii) That the County Council should continue to work with Essex District Councils to develop a process for the County Council to have a greater input and influence on consideration of applications for permitted development rights and that relevant officers ensuring ongoing links with the work of the Violence and Vulnerability Unit. [Note: This will ensure that cases like the Terminus House in Harlow should never happen again].**
- (iii) That national lobbying be considered for government to review the permitted development rights process.**

Essex Leaders and Chief Executives wrote to the London Mayor in December 2018 expressing their concerns around the placement of homeless households across Local Authority boundaries to meet housing need and specifically the placement of these households by London Boroughs into Essex. Discussions on the development of a bilateral agreement have taken place over the last 18 months with a meeting in December to finalise this agreement aimed at reducing the number and vulnerability of homeless families they placed into Essex and making any moves that do happen work better for the households and the wider community.

The agreement was developed jointly with councillors and officers from Basildon, Epping Forest, Harlow and Tendring and ECC representing Essex and councillors and officers from London Councils, Barking, Westminster, Brent, Havering, Sutton, Hammersmith & Fulham and Waltham Forest representing the London Boroughs. Progress on this agreement has been shared regularly with members via the Essex Leaders & Chief Executive (ELCE) and officers through the Essex Housing Officers Group and Essex Housing Portfolio Holders Group, all of whom have been supportive of the progress made to develop this agreement. ECC Officers have been part of the Local Government Association (LGA) working group on out of borough placements and attended parliamentary roundtables to represent ECC's views and those of the city, district and borough councils.

Adding Value to existing and planned activities

Recommendation 5 (page 20) (Owner: Cllr Madden):

That further local funding granted to the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex by local partners (such as the County Council) should be provided on a conditional basis making clear that:

- (i) it should be spent on community initiatives focussed in the County of Essex;**
- (ii) there should be the expectation that much of it should link to the priorities around county lines identified by the Community and Safety Partnerships; and**
- (iii) a clear assessment framework be established to review the effectiveness and outcomes achieved from the allocated funding.**

The VVU is in the final stages of planning its annual report 2020/21 which will show where progress has been made and where more needs to be done, which will shape any future funding and associated performance frameworks.

Once the VVU Annual Report is published we will make sure that this is shared with the Scrutiny Committee. Once we have seen the Annual Report, we will have clearer evidence to meet recommendation 5 as indicated by the Task & Finish Group.

The impact of Covid-19 cannot be under-estimated in terms of its immediate impacts on partners as they reshaped provision to meet Essex's most vulnerable and at risk residents and in terms of the ways that criminals are operating to take advantage of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Critical to the effectiveness of the VVU is a detailed understanding of the population and their different vulnerabilities to understand where funding can have the maximum impact as the issues we are seeking to address cause significant harm and have impacts not only within the communities who are harmed but on the delivery of services and the demands on our services. Understanding our communities will also enable us to more effectively identify and implement learnings from other areas of the country putting in place the interventions which are likely to be most effective and disregarding those which we believe will have limited impact.

Cross border and partnership working

Recommendation 6 (page 23) (Owner: Cllr Madden):

That there should be a regular review of the leadership of key strategic groups as part of maintaining overall diversity of leadership within the governance structure.

This is a particularly challenging recommendation and sensitive in view of the present situation surrounding Covid-19. Opportunities to discuss in detail with strategic partners on this recommendation is having to be balanced with the need to maintain and respond to the ever-changing situation with regards to lockdown enforcement and participation in local resilience forums.

However, this will be kept under review and updated as progress towards addressing this recommendation is made.

Recommendation 7 (page 24) (Owner: Cllr Madden):

Essex District Councils have local connections and influence and should be given a greater role in promoting community awareness of county lines and building resilience in the community.

The Violence and Vulnerability Unit has communicated out to all tiers of Government including Essex MPs, County and Unitary Members, District / Borough / City Councils Members, Parish Councillors, Chief Executives and Directors/Heads of Service. Information has also been sent to City, District and Borough Councils in partnership. This has been via personal emails, through introducing our newsletter and through news articles in partner newsletters such as the Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC) 'Weekly Walk Through', the PFCC newsletter, ECC's 'Future of Essex' newsletter and the ECVYS website.

We will have clearer evidence and examples with regards to this recommendation once we have sight of the VVU Annual Report as indicated above.

Improving visibility and awareness of partnership activity

Recommendation 8 (page 26) (Owner: Cllr Madden):

The Violence and Vulnerability Unit should drive and lead a local communications strategy that should focus on how drug taking is socially unacceptable and highlight the personal abuse and harm that is seen and exercised through the supply line.

The Violence and Vulnerability Unit have a programme of local communications planned on different outlets focussed on messaging around drug taking.

December, for example, saw the launch of #MerryMuletide a social media campaign aimed at educating recreational drug users on where their “party” drugs have come from.

This year Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, Essex County Council, Thurrock Council, the VVU and Essex Police all worked together to run the Southend created campaign as a joint initiative across social media. The campaign ran during December as traditionally more people are out socialising and meeting friends during this period, and while COVID-19 restricted movement this year the view was that the drug supply chain doesn’t stop. The campaign aimed to educate residents on the supply chain behind recreational drugs; the fact that children as young as 12 are made to traffic drugs across the county, abused and exploited by County Lines gangs. The campaign messages encouraged people to think twice before taking so called “party drugs” and consider the catastrophic effects their behaviour could have on local children.

It is intended that initiatives like this, particularly where these can be delivered in partnership will continue throughout 2021. ECC is committed to working in partnership in the future as it works well and will be running an unbranded campaign to educate young people about the dangers of County Lines and gang culture in Spring 2021.

In Conclusion

Many of the recommendations have been progressed by ECC and/or its partners and where progress has been delayed this can be attributed to the necessary refocussing of priorities and activities to support families, young people and schools throughout lockdown.