

YOUTH VOICES

Young people in Bexley: their experiences of crime and how they believe their communities could be improved

A research project conducted by

FUTURE COMMUNITIES



CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Foreword..... | 3 |
| Executive Summary | 4 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| Methodology..... | 6 |
| <u>Findings from the Focus Groups</u> | 7 |
| Appendices..... | 16 |

FOREWORD

I'd like to warmly welcome you all to our report on the 'Youth Voices' project. This initiative arose from discussions with young people in Bexley about their views and experiences of anti-social behaviour in the borough. What resulted from the endeavours of our researchers will be surprising to some and no doubt – confirming to others.

We could not have foreseen the recent civil unrest when we began the Youth Voices project which highlighted the importance of engaging this group. We hope that this report can contribute towards the understanding of residents, elected representatives and professionals in order that they can make informed choices and decisions that affect these groups.

The testimony of participants is especially useful in the wider debate and reveals that many of the services available are recognised and well established. We obviously have more to do in informing and signposting our young people to the excellent facilities currently available.

Gary Parker, Chair of Future Communities [UK] Ltd.

Future Communities is a social enterprise entirely staffed and managed by volunteers. We greatly appreciate the support of the Big Lottery Fund who supported and resourced this project.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Most crimes reported by respondents were against the person in a public place and involved assault and /or robbery.
- In most cases the crimes were relatively minor and no serious injuries or loss occurred.
- Young people were mostly concerned about gangs in their local area, a term which was used as a general description for groups of peers who cause trouble.
- Most of our respondents had not participated in crime or ASB but many had low level contact with the police and authority, especially when out in a group.
- Respondents generally felt safe in their local area.
- Young people recognised the value of youth facilities and services even if they were not regular users of them, but thought they should be better publicised.
- Young people saw supporting youth services and making the streets safer as their priorities for reducing crime and making their area a safer place.

INTRODUCTION

“Although a large proportion of residents of Bexley perceive young people standing on street corners as anti-social, this is not always the case, particularly when they are not doing anything wrong.”

Bexley Anti-Social Behaviour Charter

Bexley Community Safety Partnership

Future Communities have recently completed Youth Voices, a 12 month research project funded by Awards for All. We interviewed 64 young people aged 11 to 18 in the London Borough of Bexley about their experiences and opinions of, crime and anti-social behaviour and how it has affected them and their community.

The project originated in work previously carried out in Bexley as part of the Community Development Foundation’s [CDF] Connecting Communities Project. The project engaged residents in Welling in discussion about ASB issues in the neighbourhood. Common to the views expressed in other communities the importance of helping young people was emphasized. The communication gap between generations was also highlighted and it was suggested by a young participant that a ‘Youth Voices’ project could be useful in identifying the views of this group in the borough of Bexley.

METHODOLOGY

Research consisted of 10 focus groups and face to face interviews carried out across Bexley borough. In all 64 participants were interviewed. Each focus group consisted of up to 10 participants and was discussion based. Participants were asked to share their experiences of crime and anti-social behaviour and then asked to name solutions they believed would improve their communities. Participants were also asked about their usage of local youth oriented facilities and their opinions and experiences of them.

For the purposes of the study we have used broad definitions of the terms 'community' and anti-social behaviour'.

'Anti-Social behaviour' (ASB) is a term that came to public prominence as a result of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 which defined it as

“acting in a manner that causes, or is likely to cause, harassment, alarm or distress to one more persons not of the same household as the perpetrator.”

The term 'anti-social behaviour' has become commonly understood and most of the participants in the focus groups understood the term as relating to the above definition.

We allowed participants to define their geographical 'community'. This decision was based on our prior research (as part of the Connecting Communities programme) where we learnt communities defined their area in a way that may not match official ward boundaries. Individuals may refer to their 'community' as a particular set of streets or estate or refer to it by names that may be outdated or in some other way 'unofficial'. We also took into account that young people may not recognise the name of their council ward.

Focus groups were our preferred method of obtaining information as we wanted to encourage debate and the sharing of ideas. Another benefit of focus groups and interviews is they provide the opportunity to gather strong, detailed testimonies. However we did provide an online survey that could be completed for participants who were unable to attend a focus group.

Face to face interviews were also conducted when the opportunity arose. These were focused more on gaining in-depth testimonies and were used to bolster the focus group findings. Future Communities contacted schools, youth groups, community organisations and charities asking if they knew of 11-18 year olds who would be interested in taking part.

Practicalities of ensuring access during term time and outside of school meant that the majority of our respondents were aged between 16-18, although younger respondents did take part.

The interview structure followed the same framework as the focus groups. However due to the nature of interviews we had the opportunity to gather more in-depth answers and opinions to bolster the focus group research.

We included the responses to our interviews along with the focus group work due to the identical format being used.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| <i>What do you think are the main challenges facing your area?.....</i> | <i>8</i> |
| <i>Have you ever personally been affected by crime?</i> | <i>9</i> |
| <i>Have you ever been involved in or accused of taking part in ASB?</i> | <i>10</i> |
| <i>Have you used any of your local youth facilities?.....</i> | <i>11</i> |
| <i>What's your experience of them?.....</i> | <i>12</i> |
| <i>How could they be improved?.....</i> | <i>13</i> |
| <i>If you could do one thing to help young people in Bexley what would it be?.....</i> | <i>14</i> |

What do you think are the main challenges affecting your community?

“You can’t just blame it on having nothing to do, I think also the way people bring up their children can decide whether they become criminals or not.”

Female participant, 16

Throughout the Youth Voices Project, participants told us that they viewed crime committed by their peers as of most concern to them, and that this type of crime had affected them disproportionately.

The majority of our respondents named ‘gangs’ and problems caused by ‘gangs’ (rowdy behaviour, drugs, drinking alcohol) as the main problem in their communities. It is important to note that this does not necessarily refer to the more ‘established’ ‘organised’ gangs (i.e. that may have a generational structure, codes of dress and identity and links to more organised types of crime), rather it was a term used to refer to any group looking to cause trouble or harass people.

Fear of gangs repeatedly came up as an issue raised by the focus groups. At a group we held at a school participants said that they felt intimidated by ex pupils of the school loitering outside the school.

Although issues of gangs predominated, other issues were raised; for example some participants spoke of issues that affected them from their home life. One spoke of threatening neighbours and another at the same school spoke of living next door to a drug dealer who she felt engaged in acts of domestic violence.

Many of the young people felt that there was a negative perception of their age group in general and that there should be less stereotyping and labelling of young people as troublemakers based on the actions of a minority. Participants said that they had experienced being banned from shops simply for wearing a school uniform.

“Have you ever been personally affected by crime? “

Participant:

“3 years ago, me and my mate were walking through this estate just down the road from me, Barnfield estate in Plumstead. ...And we got stopped on the corner. They threatened us and put blades next to all of our throats and then we decided to make a run for it. Then we called the police after.”

Interviewer: Did anything happen after?

‘Yes they had to pay compensation.’

There were no charges for threatening you with a knife?

‘No.’

How did you feel about that?

‘Pretty angry.’

Participants, when asked to name occasions when crime had personally affected them, cited named crimes against the person, in every case committed either by their peers or people close to their own age group. These crimes involved some form of physical assault or threat, often with robbery as a motive or a factor. All these crimes took place in a public place, most often public roads and streets, primarily in their ‘local’ area. In all but one case the crimes they were affected by seemed relatively spontaneous with the offenders being strangers. Consideration also needs to be given that young people in this age range are not property owners so may be unaffected (or at least not as concerned about) directly by property crime.

Most of the crimes they reported occurred in public and seemed to be spontaneous, or without significant forethought or planning. Sometimes the offenders were people they were acquainted with, but in most cases the offenders were strangers. In many cases, robbery and assault were combined with a robbery becoming the opportunistic excuse for an assault or vice versa.

The answers to these questions were partially based on direct experience and partially anecdotal evidence. For example one of the participants referred to her brother being robbed for his mobile phone. Another spoke of a threatened robbery of a mobile phone. Many of the participants carry mobile phones with them to school but are fearful of taking them out in public view in case they are attacked.

There is a danger that particular incidents stand out but for the main part the environment in which these young people live in is comparatively safe and safer than the London average.

Have you ever been involved in or accused of taking part in crime or ASB?

'I've been arrested for a lot of things. Racism, shoplifting, ABH... I don't know, lots of things - I can't remember.'

Male participant, 17

"I've seen people do it, I've been with them when they've done it, I didn't do anything to stop them so that's kind of bad on my part but I've never done anything criminal."

Female participant, 18

This type of question is obviously difficult to ask of anyone, especially people who may have participated in crime or anti-social behaviour. Two of our respondents admitted to being involved in minor crime, involving shoplifting and criminal damage as well as a fight that ended in an assault charge. The rest of our respondents did not admit to being involved in any crime but many had been accused or suspected of wrong doing, especially when out in large groups in public. Some of the respondents reported resentment for being unfairly labelled as troublemakers due to the actions of others in their age group. This could range from being banned from shops at a certain time or being stopped by the police. This resentment did not express itself in a particularly serious manner, but was seen as being a nuisance.

"It was mainly when there used to be a big group of us. People could walk past you and look at you like you could be causing trouble when actually you were just sitting there."

Female participant, 18

"I had my key chain taken when I was in a group and they said it was a potential weapon."

Male participant, 18

It was in the answers to these questions that the issue of stereotyping repeatedly came up.

Have you used any of your local youth facilities?

"Its never appealed to me. I don't know what they do, I don't think its advertised enough."

Female participant, 18

A secondary aim of our research was to discover usage of and opinions about local services aimed at young people – anything from youth clubs and after school activities to sports teams. We felt this was an important question to ask as our previous research had brought up the importance of youth oriented services and facilities in reducing involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour amongst young people.

As the definition of youth services/ facilities is so broad, it would have been detrimental to the research to ask participants to go through a list of every single facility or scheme aimed at their age range. Therefore the question was left open for participants to define, with most regarding youth clubs as the prime youth facilities.

5 of our focus groups were held at youth clubs/facilities and 5 in schools or independently arranged. Obviously for 50% of our participants the question is already answered to a great extent.

Of the participants interviewed at youth facilities, all used one youth club/facility exclusively (the one they were interviewed in).

Of the remaining half of our respondents a majority had used their local youth facilities at some point but then decided not to carry on.

When asked why they had not carried on using such facilities the most common reply was that the facilities did not meet their specific interests. Other concerns expressed were that the existing users sometimes formed a 'clique' that was not welcoming to newcomers.

“What’s your experience of local youth facilities?”

“(What I like most about my youth club) ...The activities we get to do and hanging out with my best friend.”

Male participant, 17

“Its never advertised or anything like that. I don’t really know what goes on in there.”

Male participant, 18

The fact that half of our interviews took place in youth clubs and facilities shows that these participants obviously had a positive view of these facilities. However, we also spoke with many who did not use any facilities regularly.

It was obvious from many of the interviews that took place at clubs that many of the young people saw the club they attended as a focal point of their lives and greatly valued the pastoral role adopted by the staff.

Participants who did not use the facilities had alternative means of occupying their spare time. This included socialising with their peers at other facilities or engaging in sport or dance classes. Some felt that the youth facilities just did not appeal to them.

Some participants felt that youth facilities were too ‘cliquey’ and that as outsiders they would feel unwelcome, others believed that certain centres were for only one age range or a limited community local to the centre.

Several of our participants were banned from youth facilities from arguing with staff or other users.

Centres that offered a mixture of activities as well as opportunities for user involvement in decision -making for participants, were particularly praised.

“How could they be improved?”

“ There should definitely be a connection between schools and youth centres...

...when I left school I didn't know who to go to, who to get advice from...”

Female participant, 18

Participants across the board consistently brought up the issue of better publicising of youth centres and facilities to encourage their use. The idea of youth centres making some formal link with schools in order to present their services to young people was brought up several times in different groups. Opinions were mixed on specific facilities, although almost every one of our participants stressed the importance of youth facilities for young people. An issue raised by many respondents was that of youth facilities not being as well known as they should be, and that more could be done to publicise them. One suggestion made was to have youth groups visit school assemblies and publicise their centre and the work they do. Many of our participants were concerned about potential spending cuts to youth facilities, whether they were users of such facilities or not.

Many participants had a basic idea of their local youth centre, in terms of its name and physical location but very little else. It was felt that if there was a greater understanding of the activities and services available that this would encourage greater use.

During our interviews the comment was frequently made that if ‘x activity was offered then I would go.’ Participants agreed that this was unrealistic that youth facilities could offer a broad range of activities with limited resources. However this does point that to many young people, activities attract them to youth clubs and facilities, but the friends and relationships built with staff is what keeps them there. This was supported by evidence from long term users of youth facilities that we spoke to.

At many of the youth centres we visited the participants felt that they were not in a position to make a wider comment as they tended to only use one centre.

“If you could do one thing to help young people in Bexley what would it be?”

“They need someone to talk to. That’s what they need. They need someone who knows, not me, not that I’m bragging about myself but someone like me, that’s been there and done that, that’s seen stuff and obviously where I’m wiser now they can sit there and explain to them”

Female participant, 18

“Things need to happen earlier, instead of trying to correct kids when they’re too old, before they’re involved in behaviour like drinking, smashing things up...”

The majority of participants believed that facilities to support young people and ‘get them off the streets’ were the best way to help young people in Bexley. It is striking that even participants who did not use youth facilities and may have had individual negative experiences of them believed they played an important part in keeping young people off the streets and from becoming victims of, and participants in crime and ASB.

Interestingly, this was a view reached by many adult community members captured as testimony for the Connecting Communities’ programme in Bexley.

As with all questions we allowed participants to determine their own understanding of the question.

Users of youth facilities we spoke to, expressed concern that services may be scaled down or stopped altogether. They seemed defensive about any perceived attempt to seemingly criticise or undermine them.

Conclusion

Our respondent's experiences generally supported statistical analysis that shows that Bexley is less affected by crime than neighbouring boroughs. Although it can be argued that Bexley shares many of the problems associated with inner London boroughs – only on a smaller scale.

Personal safety was regarded as the highest priority amongst all respondents with concerns about gangs and crime committed by their peers most commonly named. Other priorities such as vehicle, property crime, noise pollution were not named. This perhaps reflected the fact that young people are less likely to own property or cars than older people.

The majority of respondents replied that they did feel safe in their community although some named areas they would not feel safe in at night. In every case this was not borne out by direct experience but perceptions, either anecdotal or media examples of crime or due to the design/lighting of areas. Named areas ranged from wide – 'Crayford' or very specific 'The underpass near where I live.'

With one exception, our respondent's direct experience of crime was thankfully only relatively minor and did not result in any serious injury or offence.

The young people we interviewed were aware of, and frustrated by negative perceptions of them.

Most of the young people we spoke to had a conservative view of crime and the causes of crime. The most cited factor for young people becoming involved in crime was a lack of anything to do, or being absent from education or out of work. Other factors commonly raised by young people included poor parenting/family upbringing.

An interesting contradiction emerged from many of our interviews – young people generally described their local area as safe, yet admitted that they often drove or were driven around their local areas or were reluctant to 'hang around the streets'. Our interviews indicated a normalisation of crime against young people, especially regards street robbery with some respondents being robbed several times. This normalisation has a detrimental affect on communities, whereby such crimes are regarded as a 'fact of life'. The danger of normalising youth crime applies to offenders as well as victims, as a reluctance to report such crimes to the police (for fear they will not be taken seriously or will be unlikely to result in any further action) can only disillusion victims from seeking justice and embolden offenders.

There are obvious difficulties with attempting to prosecute and investigate the types of crimes (peer on peer assaults and robberies) associated with young people.

For example, street robberies are often committed by strangers, are short in duration, offenders are often easily disguised (with hoods, hats, scarves etc) making positive identification difficult, and the goods they steal may be relatively low in value – from 10s to 100s of pounds. The police also find themselves in the difficult position of having to prioritise youth crime whilst also not seeking to alienate young people through searches, undue attention.

The issue of whether media representations of crime and gang behaviour affect young people and form their opinions was outside the scope of this research although it was hinted at by some of the respondent's comments.

APPENDICES

| | |
|---|-----------|
| <i>London Borough of Bexley demographics and statistics</i> | <i>17</i> |
| <i>Youth Voices</i> | <i>18</i> |
| <i>ASB— The national context</i> | <i>19</i> |
| <i>ASB—The local context.....</i> | <i>20</i> |

THE LONDON BOROUGH OF BEXLEY—DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS

According to the 2001 Census there were 13,103 young people living in the London Borough of Bexley, 7% of the total population is aged between 15-19.

The 2001 census shows that in 2001 the London Borough of Bexley had a minority ethnic population of 12.1% which was slightly lower than the national average (13%) and significantly lower than the average for London (40%). In 2001 these figures varied from 31.5% in Thamesmead East Ward to 7.1% in Crayford. Estimates by the London Borough of Bexley show that these numbers have risen in the ten years since the 2001 census (at the time of writing the 2011 census enumeration figures were not yet available). There are 13 main ethnic groups of which the largest populated group is Asian/ Asian British, Indian. Over 42 different languages are spoken in the Borough.

Unemployment for the Borough as a whole is generally low (3.4% compared to the London average of 4.5%) but there are small pockets within the Borough where the numbers are significantly higher. Unemployment amongst young people (aged 16 to 24) is slightly lower (9.3%) in Bexley than London as a whole (14.5%) and nationally (20%) furthermore there are fewer people who are long-term unemployed – 13% unemployed for over a year compared to 16% for London.

YOUTH VOICES

A national programme was conducted by the Community Development Foundation during 2010 entitled 'Connecting Communities'. This had two strands a) Identifying and training of Community Champions and b) Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour.

One of the areas selected for the second strand was the East Wickham district of Welling in the London Borough of Bexley where a Dispersal Order had been enacted. Consultants working with local people aimed to find a project that could address causes of anti-social behaviour working with local people with the aid of a grant from the Community Development Foundation funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

The identified project was entitled – The Ridley Road Motorcycle Project - an expansion of services provided by the Sidcup/ Archway Motorcycle Project. This was a diversionary activity providing funded places to young people subject to an Anti-Social Behaviour Order or thought likely to be subject to one at some stage.

The London Borough of Bexley Integrated Youth Strategy 2007-10 stated that 'the key crimes for young offenders in Bexley are identified as motoring offences, criminal damage and the theft and handling of stolen goods'. Young people either at risk or identified as potential candidates were to be directed to the provision and their places paid for by the DCLG fund.

The Youth Voices project aimed to gain a closer understanding of the drivers of anti-social behaviour from young people themselves.

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NATIONAL CONTEXT

The experience in Bexley is replicated nationally and given societal concern about these issues prompted an extensive Audit Commission report in January 2009 entitled 'Tired of Hanging Around – Using Sport and Leisure Activities to Prevent Anti-Social Behaviour by Young People.'

Recognising the Bexley Community Safety Partnership view that Adults main concerns were about young people "hanging around," Audit Commission researchers ascertained that eight out of ten young people say that they hang around to socialise cheaply and to keep safe – only 2% think that it is anti-social. The commission found that young people are concerned about being the victims of anti-social behaviour and that for young people having nothing to do can be the trigger for anti-social behaviour and its solutions.

The Audit Commission report contained six key messages for local and national government.

- *Sport and leisure have an important role in preventing anti-social behaviour.*
- *Most councils, and many other local agencies, provide or commission some good targeted activities. But there is little evidence of comprehensive area based approaches.*
- *A general lack of data on costs and performance constraints effective commissioning.*
- *Young people are rarely consulted when planning new activities. They want activities that are accessible, reliable and relevant.*
- *National funding arrangements are inefficient. Projects have to deal with unreliable short term funding that is expensive to administer.*
- *Effective solutions engage the young people at risk; they are delivered through local joint working, and national and local funding is co-ordinated.*

LOCAL CONTEXT

Bexley Children's Trust has set a vision which is

To provide all young people in Bexley with access to diverse, high quality and sustainable youth provision that contributes to their well-being and aspirations by supporting, challenging, enabling and listening to them during their transition to adulthood.

The Youth Strategy Group for Bexley has identified five strategic priorities based on:

- *Partnership*
- *The Youth Offer*
- *Involvement*
- *Quality*
- *Commissioning*

Bexley Youth Council (BYC) is a voluntary organisation with around 20 members. Members are aged 13 – 19.

Their aims are to:

- *Promote equal opportunities and diversity throughout the community*
- *Design services and make sure they meet the needs of the young community*
- *Combat discrimination.*
- *Provide training and guidance to members and relay this into helping the community*

BYC have also worked with the UK Youth Parliament and the Connexions Youth Board.

BYC has a Crime and Justice group that deals with issues of crime affecting young people.

They are currently making a DVD about 'racism' and have held 'intergenerational' meetings as well as regular sessions meeting with police officers.

They have stated that:

'In the near future we are going to participate in an Independent Advisory Group and scrutiny panels which question police methods and strategies for dealing with youth crime in Bexley. We will also be able to suggest new initiatives in order to improve relations between young people

What do you consider to be anti-social behaviour?

The definition of anti-social behaviour as given by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 is:

“a manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons not of the same household as the perpetrator”

Participants were asked to state what they considered to be anti-social behaviour. The most perceptive answer was probably provided at Tavy Bridge where one member of the focus group said that there was ‘no one definitive answer.’ Another interesting definitional answer was provided by a pupil at Welling School who defined anti-social behaviour as being that which was ‘against the norms of society’.

The definitional problems regarding anti-social behaviour have been identified in the Home Office in Research Report 34 (March 2010) which stated that Anti-Social Behaviour is a confusing term *“which has been variously applied to a wide spectrum of activity, from serious criminal violence and persistent ongoing intimidation and harassment at one end of the spectrum, to subjective feelings of unease caused by relatively minor and perhaps occasional environmental disturbances, such as litter: at the other”*.

This research study suggested that the seven strands of ASB recorded in the British Crime Survey should instead be adopted which are characterised as follows:

Environmental ASB

- *Abandoned or burnt-out cars*
- *Noisy neighbours or loud parties*
- *Rubbish or litter lying around*
- *Vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property*

ASB Restricting access to public spaces

- *People being drunk or rowdy in public places*
- *People using or dealing drugs*
- *Teenagers hanging around on the streets.*

The fact that the mere presence of young people in a public place is perceived by some as anti-social behaviour has undoubtedly reinforced public stereotyping. A pupil at Welling School said that there was a mistaken view that it was all about young people.



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