

Working together we can break the cycle

Police, Partners and Education a shared responsibility

It will come as no surprise to many, if not all of you to hear that even from an early age it is possible to identify children most at risk of entering the criminal justice world either as victims or perpetrators.

It surely follows then it is vital to understand who these children are and ensure across the partnership they receive the support for the child, their siblings and their parents. By doing this we can perhaps break the cycle of life, some families have lived in for generations, providing children with the chance for positive life choices and encouraging them to have aspirations to achieve.

Hopefully by now you are all still reading this and more importantly whole heartedly in agreement with this concept. However you are perhaps thinking “Well yes this is all very interesting and makes sense, but what has this got to do with governors and schools”.

In the next few short paragraphs I hope to explain and gain your support to work together to make a difference. Historically West Midlands Police have concentrated on the acquisitive crimes which affect communities as a whole, the ones we understand most; burglary, robbery, car crime. These crimes are of course important and must remain part of the role of police, working in partnership to resolve and bring offenders to justice. It is working in this way we have been very successful over the last ten years in bringing down the volumes of crime, making Dudley the safest borough in the West Midlands to live and work and West Midlands Police one of the most successful forces in the country at tackling crime and making it a safer place to live.

However at this same time and with the opportunity reducing this crime has enabled, we have sought to tackle crimes that cause more harm and more importantly tackle the underlying causes rather than keep responding to the symptoms. In reflecting this change in focus the strategic priorities for West Midlands Police and here in Dudley are simple; ‘Tackling Violence, by adopting an Intervention and Prevention approach’.

So what does this mean, all violence includes minor assaults, to the serious harm of child sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation, modern slavery and serious assaults including murder. These are not crimes that directly affect all in society, in fact they are crimes that will only affect a small percentage of the population. However I’m sure you will agree that these are crimes that have devastating impacts on society as a whole and for those it does affect many are children or young adults, as communities we should seek to protect.

This led West Midlands police to look differently at the problem, thinking how we can make a real difference. In doing so there have been a number of developments:

- Adopting and working in partnership with Public Health England to see violence as affecting public health rather than just a crime. This has resulted in the creation of the Violence Prevention Alliance. The definition of a young person now reflected as 0-25 rather than 0-18 and addressing violence as a multi-agency approach.

- The recognition of academic research which identifies Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the impact these have on a person's early life. These are factors such as, growing up in a household where there is domestic abuse, mental illness, substance misuse, or a family member has been imprisoned and/or where as a child they have been subject to physical abuse, sexual abuse or suffer from mental illness. A child brought up exposed to four or more ACEs is 70% more likely to be a victim or perpetrator of violence than a child brought up exposed to none.
- Finally instead of West Midlands Police Strategic assessment being focussed on the acquisitive crimes and based on intelligence and data analytics it has taken the life journey of a young person who at the age of 15 was imprisoned for attempted murder and sought to understand how predictable this was and were opportunities missed to prevent this.

I hope you continue to agree with what has been said thus far, as now comes the part where I hopefully outline what this means to you as governors and for your schools.

To help me understand ways in which we might seek to address the challenge of

‘How do we identify, intervene and prevent a young person coming to serious harm?’

I considered first where our greatest gaps were and who holds both the information and the knowledge to predict and identify the children at most risk. It is through this thought I realised that whilst Social Services, Children's Services, Midwifery and many other partners all hold vital information which can help, there is one sector, one group of people who have more exposure to children than anyone else, who meet the families and perhaps have known several generations of them. This group of people have nearly as much contact with children as their parents do. This is of course teachers and schools.

To test this theory I have spoken to several head teachers, mainly from primary schools as this is the greatest opportunity to identify at an early stage. I have asked them to not to consider whether their data indicates it or the performance outlines it, but the narrative, the professional judgement, the experience. Can teachers potentially identify in reception the children exposed to the ACE theory, therefore the children most likely to be at risk of harm in later years?

Unsurprisingly every teacher so far has stated without doubt they can. So if teachers and schools believe they can identify these children at greatest risk my question to you as governors is:

- How do we get this on the agenda in all schools or at least those in the areas where we know there are greater risks?
- How do we embed this as something we adopt in all schools, including ways to tackle the problem through different learning approaches?
- What are the barriers and how do we remove them?

Improving lives, safeguarding and providing children with positive opportunities is the surely the responsibility of all of us. Together can we make this happen and surely we should at the least aspire and commit to try our best for them.

Could I ask you perhaps discuss this article at your school governors meetings as an agenda and provide a collective response through the governing body on some answers to the three questions I pose. Many Thanks

Chief Supt. Richard Fisher.