



## **Knowledge Exchange Network: youth engagement**

The [Knowledge Exchange Network](#) held its sixth meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> July. This session explored how youth voice and engagement can enhance effective policing, increase trust and solve problems.

**Gabby Jones**, Project Manager at Leaders Unlocked, and three of their Youth Commissioners, presented on their youth commission model which provides a platform for young people (aged 14-25) with prior involvement in the criminal justice system to campaign on policing issues. This involves delivering workshops on issues that have impacted their lives. It has three main benefits:

- At the **society/community** level, this is a productive way to hear from young people and to increase awareness of the PCC role;
- For **young people** creating and delivering workshops, it is highly beneficial for personal development, giving them an opportunity to affect change and to improve employability;
- For **the police**, the youth commission offers the opportunity to improve their relationship with young people.

Gabby's presentation slides are available [here](#).

We also heard from three youth commissioners on their experiences of engaging with the police. Selected quotes include:

- "It's been good to develop my own understanding as well as learn and teach other people... it has been awesome to show the police and the voluntary sector what we're doing."
- "I am scared of the police. I was recommended to be part of the commission. Since then it has helped improve my mental health. I understand policing better... my experience has been amazing. I have a severe disability, and this has helped me hugely with confidence."
- "If I looked at myself a year ago, I wouldn't recognise myself. Without [Leaders Unlocked] I'd be sat in juvie right now."

**Russ Massie**, Lead for Children and Young People at Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit, presented on their Children and Young People Strategy. Russ spoke about the importance of not reinforcing trauma from children's past experiences when engaging with pupils in schools. [This LSE report](#) finds that involving police officers in education on the law can help build positive relations between the police and young people. He also discussed their diversion work with the NPCC to ensure 'crime' is dealt with by schools and not by the criminal justice system where appropriate.

**Jo Grimshaw**, Youth Engagement Lead at Surrey Police, spoke about Surrey Police's strategy and the creation of her role. Surrey has made significant investments into becoming a [problem-oriented](#) force which involves scanning a young person's surroundings before a criminal justice response. This forms part of their 'think child' principles – or 'child-first' approach – where the question of *why* a child has encountered police is asked to help avoid further long-term harm. As part of this, Surrey has increased the number of youth engagement officers. Jo's presentation slides are available [here](#).

The Network then split into workshop groups where the following themes were discussed.

### ***Engaging with and consulting young adults with lived experience of the criminal justice system***

The group agreed that while there are pockets of good youth engagement, it is currently inconsistent. Forces are at varied stages of creating a sufficient youth engagement model (such as youth advisory groups) but it was evident that little focus is given to the young adult cohort

specifically. The demographic diversity of Independent Advisory Groups (IAGs) can be poor and they often fail to account for younger age groups.

A number of challenges to effective engagement were raised:

- Ensuring services are designed in an inclusive way which capture a range of experiences (recognising that personal experiences may not be representative of everyone);
- The difficulty in recruiting young adults willing to speak about their experiences and finding a safe space for them to do this. It is often the people the police *need* to hear from (i.e. those at most risk) who are the hardest to engage;
- How youth engagement is approached by individuals within the same force can be inconsistent. This is a cultural issue which recognises that it can take many years to embed a certain way of thinking (child-first and problem-solving policing);
- Ensuring other agencies are onboard with how the police look to interact with young people;
- How engagement should be facilitated across the whole system. For example, PSHE classes in schools may better placed to deliver learning on some issues, and supporting parents to recognise signs of exploitation;
- Social media: breaking down online/offline space (and the power dynamics behind police on social media) which have become increasingly merged;
- Funding can be piecemeal and it is often difficult to make the case for investment if the benefits won't be reaped for years to come.

#### *Examples of good practice*

- [Thames Valley Police's drugs diversion scheme](#): anyone who is found in the possession of drugs is diverted into the drug diversion programme. If they continue to be found in possession, they can re-enter the service multiple times until they are engaged. If they do not engage they cannot continue with the intervention.
- Also in Thames Valley: [Oxon CC Children in Care Council \(CiCC\)](#), [Children Heard and Seen](#), [Oxfordshire Youth](#).
- [Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme](#): gives voice to vulnerable victims and witnesses.
- Surrey Police and Cheshire Constabulary invite young people to officer training to advise on various interactions.
- Useful engagement tools: <https://www.askthe.police.uk/content/@1.htm> and <https://www.instagram.com/yourpolice.uk/?hl=en>

#### ***Understanding the benefits of youth engagement and overcoming the challenges***

Forces' understanding of why youth engagement can be beneficial is mixed. There was some concern reported around senior officers having interest in youth engagement but it being for the wrong reasons; those understanding of the importance of youth engagement often have to 'sell' it as a method of 'detecting' crime. Conversely, some senior officers do not believe the police should be in schools (see, for example, [this Runnymede Trust report](#)). Efforts to embed engagement into policing needs commitment from more than just a motivated few. This culture shift (which can often be perpetuated by wider social conditioning) takes leadership, training and ongoing supervision.

Ensuring officers doing the engagement are demographically diverse was seen as important to achieving a positive response from young people. It can often be the case the officers under the age



of 25 prefer to do response policing and do not see the value in youth engagement until later in their career.

Emphasis was given to the importance of an appropriate communications strategy, and the need to be proactive on social media. Currently, communication is not tailored to young people and often involves a senior officer reading a script. The language used during engagement can shape a young person's view of the police for the rest of their life so an approach must not be negative, suspicious or threatening. Listening to those with lived experience of the criminal justice system with empathy and patience is key, but it is equally vital that action is taken.

There is increasing evidence that 'scare tactics' do not work, despite some forces still using these in communication (see '[Scared Straight](#)' programmes). As it may not always be obvious who may be exploited, core messages around it being ok to seek help and to be honest about one's experiences are vital. More should be done to equip parents/guardians to help with engagement.

**Please note that we will NOT be holding a meeting on August 24<sup>th</sup>. The next Knowledge Exchange Network meeting will take place on Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> October at 3-5pm and will be on the theme of street interactions. Click [here](#) to join the meeting.**

Please contact Stephen Walcott for more information: [stephen.walcott@police-foundation.org.uk](mailto:stephen.walcott@police-foundation.org.uk)