

May 2004

Are Gangs Family? youth conference report

**The Bristol Gang Awareness Project
and
Community Resolve
(creative conflict resolution in the community)**

Easton Community Centre
Kilburn Street, Easton Bristol BS5 6AW
M: 0779 930 8588
T: 0117 954 1409 ext 204
E: communityresolve@eastonca.org

background to the project

The Bristol Gang Awareness Project was formed in September 2003 following a meeting with 28 local community workers and organisations who came together to pool their thoughts about local youth gang activity after a stabbing incident between two groups of young people in central Bristol.

Since then, a partnership of organisations and agencies has been working to develop a coordinated and ongoing strategy to address destructive inner city gang activity. The Bristol Gang Awareness Project project partners have included: Community Resolve, BS5 Youth Partnership, Bristol Young People's Services, Avon & Somerset Police, Community at Heart, Barnardos, Community Links, Inner City Community Safety and the Nilaari Project.

"A key part of our work is trying to prevent young people following in their footsteps. There is so much passion and commitment in the community about this. Regeneration money needs to be directed towards increasing the facilities and opportunities for young people in the area. I would like to see all the agencies focused on this issue: the local authority, education, police. Everybody has a role to play."

Bristol's Chief Superintendent Mike Rowe, 2003, on local gang activity

why the conference?

At the September meeting, it was felt that opportunities were needed for young people from different geographical areas of the city to get to know each other. As many of the disputes between local young people centre around race, religion and territory - both in and out of school - it was clear that developing an understanding of others was going to be core to breaking down some of the tensions between groups of young people.

Drawing on experiences at the **Gangs – what gangs?** conference run by LEAP Confronting Conflict in London (July 2003), it was agreed to organise a Bristol conference which encouraged young people from different areas of central Bristol to talk to each other about their experiences of local gangs. After discussion, it was agreed that the conference would be aimed at the 13-16 age group, encouraging those affected by gang activity or possible future gang members to attend, rather than those currently in gangs. (It was felt that time would be needed to develop relationships with gang members, although if these relationships were established, future events might include them.)

The conference aims included:

- raising awareness among young people of the costs and gains of being drawn into gangs
- consulting young people on their views of how best to deal with the issues of gangs
- presenting examples of gang-related work going on around the country
- giving young people an opportunity to listen to the opinions of their peers
- providing a video resource for use by all Bristol youth groups and schools about gang activity, filmed and edited by young people for young people.

how young people got involved

From the earliest planning meetings, it was important to identify how to hear from and involve the young people themselves. The planning group thought it was essential to learn from previous similar events and evaluations that had taken place in central Bristol, such as the Community Links Gun Amnesty day, the Young Black and Asian Women's conference and Big Time. Elements of organisation for the conference were drawn from each of these events – so thank you to their organisers for their ideas.

From January 2004, a (floating) team of 30 or so young people became involved in putting the conference together, contributing a variety of skills. Most of these were young people known to workers in the conference planning group through their involvement with local projects such as Nilaari, the Barton Hill Youth Forum and Kumani. Others were brought along by their friends.

'It's great to have a conference for young people ran by young people - it just makes a change for adults not to be running it. The group from London were good, 'cos they were all young people too'

Participant/workshop leader, 15

Some attended regular planning meetings to discuss what would happen on the day while others attended a training day in half term to develop the story lines behind the improvised 'chat-show' style workshops. On the day itself, there were young people on reception, presenting the whole conference, taking part in large and smaller group discussions, running the workshops, and filming the conference for use in a discussion video around the topic of gangs. A team of six or so are still working on the production of the video, which is expected to be distributed to schools and youth clubs during June 2004.

On the evaluation form filled in by all those who attended, 30 young people said they would like to get involved in continuing this work in some way – as part of a conference planning team, as peer educators, or being involved in the video and drama side of the project. After the conference, seven young people attended a debrief meeting to look at what had gone well and what could have worked better.

Paying young people We decided that we would recognise the input of young people with some financial incentive. We offered music vouchers for those performing on the day or running workshops, and paid the conference planning team £5 per hour for their time, recognising that they turned out week after week to come to meetings. To be paid, the young people needed to sign a contract and fill in timesheets, supervised by an adult.

Asked after the event about what they felt about being paid, the young people thought it had been important that their time had been noted and valued. When it was pointed out that they could not get any volunteer accreditation for the time they put in, they were clear that they would rather receive money, as they would still be able to use the experience on their CVs. All those who took part received a certificate from the Bristol Gang Awareness Project outlining their input.

With consideration, the adult planning group felt that it was right to pay the young people, but wondered whether in future half of the earnings should be paid into a savings account (or equivalent), if the young people were in agreement.

the day itself ...

Over 100 young people from six central Bristol secondary schools and a range of youth clubs attended the conference, held at the Rose Green Cricket Club. The day ran from 9.45am-2.30pm, with a half hour lunch break.

As the whole point of the day was to have a discussion between young people, there was minimal input from adults on the day itself, and as much input from young people as possible. Two young people did registration – ‘At least we got to meet everyone,’ said one – and three conference presenters aged 22, 15 and 14 led the day from the start, briefly calling on the conference organisers to explain the background to the project and the conference itself. One of the hosts admitted she was ‘really nervous, but after a while you get used to standing up in front of the audience and now it’s over I’m really glad I did it’.

The day kicked off with a plenary discussion around the topic of ‘What is a gang?’, during which a majority of young people present clearly stated that they are not in gangs but friendship groups or crews, and want to be seen as such. Afterwards, participants split into two groups to attend workshops devised and run by young people. These interactive sessions used a chat-show format to outline a gang scenario (gang activity on the street or in school) and then encouraged the ‘audience’ to put their points of view across.

While these workshops were underway, the adults at the conference were asked to attend a separate discussion amongst themselves, partly to explore an adult perspective and partly to leave the young people to interact with as little adult presence as possible. The main themes that emerged from this discussion were that:

- Working with school-aged young people is complicated, not least because schools are overwhelmed by approaches by agencies for temporary involvement in projects
- As far as young people and gang involvement are concerned, the stakes are raised after they leave school at 16, when they have more leisure time on their hands and more need for money
- Young people can act with impunity when there is little link-up between the various areas of their lives – home, school, youth clubs, etc.
- There is a need for agencies to work together – rather than in competition – to provide the services young people need, and to fill in the gaps.

After lunch (sandwich and cakes in a bag – deeply unpopular with the young people, as they made clear on the evaluation forms!), the London group From Boyhood to Manhood presented a drama and then discussion around the topic Are Gangs Family?, drawing on their own experiences as ex-gang members.

Before the day finished, all participants were asked to fill in an evaluation form with some thought, and were encouraged to do so by a £5 music voucher. The evaluation form was in an information pack which everyone received, which included articles on local gang activity, some ideas of how to do more research into the topic and contact details for those who wanted to stay in touch with the project.

Before everyone went home, there was entertainment from local dance groups, poets and rappers, with an impromptu dance for those who stayed on at the end.

“I think the whole event was very successful and I hope/want to be a part of the next conference”

Presenter and participant, 14

what they thought – evaluations

The young people's evaluations of the day were very positive. Almost everyone said they had enjoyed themselves, roughly 95% said they would like to attend future conferences, and a third said that they would be interested in taking the work further to raise awareness in schools and youth clubs. We asked them which of the sessions they enjoyed the most – the plenary, workshop and group from London - and all three came out just about even, reflecting the importance of providing sessions to meet the different learning styles of those who attended.

Questions on the young people's evaluation form

How old are you?

Did you enjoy the day?

What did you enjoy the most?

What could have been done differently?

What have you learnt from today?

Would you come to another conference?

Do you want to get involved?

Asked 'What did you learn from today?', a sample of comments from participants included:

- Not to put myself in unnecessary positions that I can't get out of
- There isn't really a meaning to the word 'gang'
- Gangs aren't family
- Fighting don't solve nothing
- Gangs are not necessarily bad
- People say they aren't in something you can label yet everyone labels others

After the conference we held a debrief meeting for the conference planners of all ages. The young people were definitely pleased with the result, but felt that some things could have gone better:

- There should have been more time to prepare workshops/for presenters, etc
- It could have worked better with the schools – liaising with them re content for the Citizenship curriculum, etc, so it would have been easier for pupils (esp. Yr 11) to be allowed out
- The food was wrong – there should have been hot food, and more choice in what you got
- Was the venue right? It could have been larger/nicer, and the workshop rooms were too small
- The mix of young people – not many Asian/white young people. How were participants picked by the schools/clubs?
- The workshop groups were too big – maybe the young men would have joined in more if the groups had been smaller?

Although around 35 adults attended the event and received a fact pack containing an evaluation sheet, we only received a handful of adult evaluation forms back. However, the few comments we did get reflected the observations of the conference organisers, that the day was:

- Very informative but not a good mix of cultures
- Interesting – only the beginning
- Good, content interesting, not sure if we got to the core issues
- Good as a day to bring young people and elders or service providers together and share causes and effects of gangs

Asked how they would use the ideas from the day in their work, their suggestions included bringing the ways of working to their youth groups to develop the work further, contacting stakeholders to help young people in gang families and to do more workshops.

**'You don't have to be
in a gang to be
respected – it's just
the way you treat
people which makes
them treat you in the
same way'**

Participant, 16

key learning points

As the first conference of its kind in Bristol, led by young people for young people, it was by definition experimental. Overall, feedback suggests it was a success, and it is therefore useful as a template for future conferences – the Bristol Gang Awareness Project is hoping to run a six-monthly conference/youth discussion forum on related topics. However, everyone involved had suggestions as to how it could have been improved, and a number of key learning points were identified by the adults and young people on the planning groups.

The major concern of the adults involved was: 'Did we get the message across?'. Put another way, can adults both hand over control to young people and steer the content of the day?

Working with young people We were pleased to have attracted a group of 30 individuals in the 13-22 age range to work with us, and were definitely impressed by their interest, commitment and ideas. Nonetheless, there were some difficulties in working with them:

- *When and where do you organise planning meetings?* Everyone had different after-school activities to attend, and some were revising for exams. In the winter months, none wanted to walk far, especially as we were bringing together young people from a number of different areas. As a result, a number of the organisers gave young people lifts to and from meetings.
- *How do you keep them on board?* Although some came and went, most were pretty consistent in their attendance. Payment for their time definitely helped to keep them engaged, although a number said they'd have worked on the project anyway.
- *How can you support the workshop facilitators?* Generally speaking, the young people involved in running workshops were highly responsible and responsive. It is a complicated business, acting, improvising, responding to audience queries and handling a large group of people. We provided a free workshop during half term to work on these points and their scripts and presentations, and Hanna Lune of Travelling Light ran a couple of similar sessions in schools. The results were engaging and lively workshops, but ran too short on the day – one inventive group simply called for volunteers from their workshop participants, and started the story all over again.
- *How do you work with young presenters?* Using presenters of the same age brought much greater engagement by the young people in the discussions than if adults had led the conversations. However, the pressure of holding a large group discussion and thinking on their feet meant that a number of key points about the topic were never made. There were briefing meetings with the presenters, who also had both a loose and tight script to work to, but without a greater understanding of the topic, it was hard for them to develop and/or challenge points made by the participants. At the debrief, young people suggested a number of ways to improve this, including presentations by adults, working through the handouts in the information packs, and more preparation with presenters beforehand.

'I was very nervous before the actual day happened, wondering if anyone would turn up, how the young people from the Barton Hill youth forum would cope with meeting such a large crowd of people. Well, there was no need to worry - the forum all coped so well, they seem to be getting used to going to conferences and really joining in now.'

Marlene McAllister, Community at Heart

Although more time would have been good to prepare the presenters and workshop leaders, the conference organisers would like to thank all those who took part – you were superb.

Working with the schools We were pleased that six Bristol schools attended the conference, and pupils from a number of others took part in the planning and delivery of the conference. A couple of schools engaged fully with the conference, and provided both time and workshop leaders for us to work with. However, a number of difficulties came up while trying to liaise with schools:

- Although schools were first approached several months before the conference, it took some of them quite a while to identify whether they were interested in attending/taking part
- On first approach, two schools said they definitely would bring large groups of participants – up to 13 per school – but they then withdrew their groups in the conference week, after food had been ordered but too late to allow another school to take part. The reasons were lack of staff.
- Communications within the schools themselves appeared to be very poor. Paperwork and messages sent via post, email and phone were consistently lost by all the schools, who on occasion denied we had even been in touch with them.
- Organising exits from school for workshop leaders to attend preparatory sessions and the day itself was complicated. One group of workshop leaders in Yr 11 were refused permission to attend the day until the morning of the conference itself, by which time it was too late for them to run a workshop at all. The project needs to be more aware of appropriate exit procedures.
- There is a need to work closely with Citizenship coordinators of secondary schools to demonstrate the usefulness of the work in fulfilling curriculum requirements. If that could be clearly established, there may be a way to build an ongoing relationship with the project.
- Due to the high level of demand by outside agencies on school time, and the high demands on staff time, it is important to start liaising with schools well in advance.

Diversity of participants Interestingly, although we asked schools and youth clubs to bring a mix of cultures and genders, we ended up with about 80% young black people (central Bristol has approximately 35% non-white population, from a range of cultures), mainly from an African Caribbean background. In discussion, the delegates themselves commented on that racial bias, pointing out that often the term 'gang' is associated with young black people, especially in central Bristol, whereas the reality is very different. One of the follow-ups to the conference will be working with the adults who attended, asking them to reflect on who they brought to the day, and why.

One worker with a youth project for young Asian people commented that the different communication styles of the participants had discouraged her group from talking, despite being a confident group themselves. Much of the conference debate was dominated by overly confident young women, mostly black or mixed race, who are quick with a come-back in conversation.

Partnership working A core group of 8 people met fortnightly from October to March to plan and organise the conference. All the agencies involved – from both the voluntary and statutory sectors - have enjoyed working in partnership and want to develop the Bristol Gang Awareness Project further, as the following testimonials from Bristol City Council and the police indicate:

*My involvement with the Bristol Gang Awareness Project began in July 2003 when Hen Wilkinson, Wayne Graham and myself attended the **Gangs - what gangs?** conference in London, which explored gang-related issues from local, national and international perspectives. As a youth officer with the Local Authority, it became imperative for me to become involved in a project which explored issues relating to the emergence of gang culture and the implications for local young people.*

Bristol's Young People's Service has benefited greatly from my direct involvement with the project, raising the profile of gang-related issues across the city, developing positive inter-agency work, and enhancing the opportunity for Black young people to have their say and get involved. Feedback from participants at the conference will influence new approaches in working with marginalised young people and innovative work around peer education.

The Young People's Service core values of participation, group work and equalities have all been demonstrated in this much valued and innovative project, highlighting the importance of young people's involvement.

Ras C Mudada, BOME unit, Bristol Young People's Services

*Avon and Somerset Constabulary are pleased to be involved in the Bristol Gang Awareness Project. Working with the community and especially young people provides an insight into the issues behind gangs and how to address them effectively. The **Are Gangs Family?** conference demonstrated the positive attitude of young people towards tackling the issue.*

As a key funder for the project, it has been good to invest the time and the money. The success of the project to date is due to effective partnership working between the agencies. We hope that the relationships built with other partners and young people will be further developed to make the community a safer place for all.

Hayley Broomfield, Youth Projects Coordinator, Avon & Somerset Constabulary

One of the reasons the partnership worked so well was because any disagreements that came up between the partners were addressed immediately and directly, using conflict resolution methods. This commitment of the adults to work with the same methods that we are promoting to young people is an essential part of how the Bristol Gang Awareness Project operates.

Working with the media Due to a couple of previous unhappy experiences with the Bristol media, the planning group were clear that we did not want the mainstream media to cover the conference. There was no need for publicity, as this was not an open event.

Although we were approached by BBC Radio Bristol about coverage, the position was clearly explained to them. Nonetheless, they persisted in trying to find someone to talk about the event, eventually interviewing someone with no knowledge of the day, its context or its content. This interview was repeated throughout the day, sensationalising the topic – gangs – in precisely the way that neither the gang awareness project coordinators nor the delegates thought appropriate. This disregard by the media of the organisers' expressed wishes confirmed that our original inclination not to involve them was correct.

As the interviewee was a senior but uninvolved representative of the statutory sector, it became clear that the project needs clear Terms of Reference outlining the roles of the respective partners, their rights to take decisions without consulting the others, etc. This is now a priority task of the project.

next steps

As an immediate outcome of the conference, the Bristol Gang Awareness Project will be distributing the Are Gangs Family? discussion video to Bristol schools and youth clubs. It will be accompanied by a fact sheet and workshop scripts.

After that, we will develop two main strands of work:

- running regular youth discussion forums and working with other organisations in Bristol to develop a peer educator team around the issues of gangs
- developing a specialist trained team to work with older, involved gang members

The organisers of the **youth discussion forums** will be drawn from local schools, youth clubs and community projects, and will be in the age range of 13-23. Thirty young people have expressed an interest in taking part and we expect to work with a core group of 15. Given the age range, we expect this to be a fluid and constantly changing group of young people.

The **specialist team** of gang workers will be drawn from the local community, mostly in the age range of 17-27. These individuals will not necessarily be already trained, or literate. The key qualities required are an understanding of the pressures and ties on gang members and an ability to establish a relationship of trust with marginalised young people. Once trained, they will work on a sessional basis to a workplan devised by a coordinator and the team itself.

If a funding bid with Comic Relief is successful, we plan to appoint a part-time coordinator for the Bristol Gang Awareness Project this autumn, employed by Community Resolve.

If anyone wishes to work with any aspect of this project – planning groups, youth work, specialist training, etc – or knows of someone who might be interested, please get in touch with Hen Wilkinson at Community Resolve.

Hen Wilkinson, May 2004