

Local Democracy Week – joint Youth Parliament and Merton Council Scrutiny exercise – keeping young people safe in Merton, 15 October 2018

Five members of the Youth Parliament (of whom two were also Young Advisors) were joined by seven scrutiny councillors from all political groups on the council to take part in an exercise to address the question posed by the Youth Parliament - “what is Merton doing to keep young people safe?”

The objectives of this innovative event were to:

- give young people some experience of and insight into the council’s scrutiny processes
- reach agreement on recommendations and future action in respect of keeping young people safe in Merton
- identify ways in which young people could be involved in future scrutiny activities

There was a preparatory hour during which:

- councillors explained the principles of scrutiny and how it works in Merton
- the two Young Advisors talked to the councillors about the results of the consultation they had conducted with 742 young people (aged 11-20) in the borough
- youth parliament members and councillors agreed a number of questions that they would put to the Safer Merton and Police witnesses
- it was agreed that youth parliament member, Beverley, would chair the formal meeting.

Beverley invited the two witnesses, Temitayo from Safer Merton and Mark from the Police to join the meeting.

The Young Advisors, Kimberley and Margaret, provided copies of their presentation and a written report of their consultation results. They gave a thorough and well-received presentation setting out the main findings of the consultation, their views on what the results might mean and their recommendations for action. The main points noted during discussion were:

- boys were much less likely to fill in the survey form than girls
- 23% of respondents gave no response to question “what does safe mean to you in Merton”
- Mitcham perceived as the least safe area in the borough, Wimbledon as most safe
- 1 in 3 respondents were aware of someone who had committed a crime and 1 in 10 had been a victim of crime
- Stabbing and knife crime perceived as most common crime

Mark Roberts, Merton Youth Engagement Sergeant, gave an overview of his responsibilities, in particular for school police officers, and the preventative measures

taken (such as knife arches and weapon sweeps) to help make young people feel safe in Merton. He also provided detail of police cadet and other activity in Merton designed to divert young people from engaging in crime.

Temitayo Oketunji, Victims Champion in Safer Merton, described the work that Safer Merton carried out in partnership with the police and other organisations. This includes work on anti-social behaviour, hate crime and violence against women and girls.

Mark and Temitayo provided additional information in response to questions from the youth parliament members and councillors:

Police cadets

- The police cadets are publicised in a number of ways including through the school police officers, social media and word of mouth. There is a cadet co-ordinator who follows up enquiries.
- The gender mix is pretty even and membership is ethnically diverse
- There are about 100 cadets at the moment, aiming to reach 160 and to open a new unit

Knife crime

- Knife crime has reduced slightly in Merton over the past 12 months but the fear of crime is acknowledged and the police is doing its best to reassure young people
- Young people sometimes carry a knife for protection but this is still an offence
- Police find stop and search to be a useful tool in combatting knife crime

Stop and search

- There is a legislative framework and a police officer must have good grounds for carrying out a stop and search, such as a report from the public. On 4 occasions in the past 3 weeks, CCTV footage has been used to follow up on exchange of drugs leading to arrests on each occasion.
- councillors and youth parliament members endorsed usefulness of stop and search but expressed concerns that certain groups are targeted
- youth parliament members were invited to attend a training day for police officers to promote understanding of police and young people's perspectives on stop and search

Beverley thanked Mark and Temitayo for their contributions. They left the meeting at this point.

Beverley invited members of the youth parliament to reflect on what they had heard from Safer Merton and the Police and to discuss the recommendations made by the Young Advisors. They said that the police cadet groups were not being actively promoted by the school police officers, that the cadets had a low profile and didn't seem to reflect the diversity within the borough. They cautioned that joining the

police cadets might not be attractive to many young people due to perceived stigma around being associated with the police.

In relation to the role of school police officers, one of the youth parliament members said that turnover in their school meant that pupils didn't know them well and therefore found them difficult to approach. They suggested that new school police officers should be introduced in school assemblies and that there should be an announcement of the change before a new officer starts.

Youth parliament members agreed that they would like to see more activities provided for young people, such as youth clubs and extended library opening hours, to give them somewhere safe to go. There was a discussion about where best to advertise, with some preferring this to be done through schools and others preferring on-line resources and use of social media. The youth parliament members said they would appreciate support from councillors to use their influence to raise some of these issues with schools.

A youth parliament member said that more complex messages are required in relation to gangs to make it clear that gang membership or association with a gang is not a safe option for a young person and nor is carrying a knife. These messages should include asking the young person to consider the impact that this would have on their family.

Each of the recommendations of the Young Advisors was discussed and AGREED as follows:

- to continue with making a documentary to raise awareness about crime within the borough
- forums of decision makers should consult regularly in order to understand young peoples' views and to keep up-to-date on their perspectives
- schools and youth services to provide a link between young people and decision makers. This should include using school assemblies, workshops and class talks.
- To work with young people to help them articulate what safe means to them and to understand what safe should look and feel like at home, at school and in the community. Requested support from the council in order to do this.
- Services work to reduce stereotypes and get to know people before judging them

Two additional recommendations were agreed:

- police officers should invite police cadets to attend events to raise awareness of their role amongst young people
- headteachers should ensure that the appointment of new school police officer is announced at school assemblies prior to them taking up the role and should invite them to attend an assembly when they start.

The youth parliament members and councillors AGREED that the note of this meeting should be presented to a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission so that the recommendations could be endorsed and referred to Cabinet for

consideration. It was also AGREED to involve young people more in scrutiny in future – ACTION: Head of Democracy Services to discuss with the Participation Manager and make recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Scrutiny Panels.