

# Impact of government policy on knife crime

House of Lords  
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## KEY MESSAGES

- Tackling serious violent crime is a key priority for councils. It has become even more vital due to rising levels of violent crime and the harm it causes to victims and young people drawn and exploited into committing it.
- This complex issue requires a multi-agency partnership approach including education, health, social services, housing, youth services, victim services, charities, local government, and law enforcement.
- The risk of being exploited or involved in violent crime can be reduced with the correct interventions. Alongside health and education partners, local authorities are well placed to take advantage of 'reachable and teachable moments' and identify which interventions are most effective and how they can be implemented.
- In our report on family violence and links with youth offending<sup>1</sup>, we identified certain risk factors that could affect a child or young person being exploited or involved in violent crime. These could include frequent truancy, levels of poverty and deprivation, and experiences of family violence.
- The Government has announced a series of separate pots of funding that local partnerships could bid for to support and protect children and young people from criminal activity. Whilst announcements of new funds are welcome, this should not replace the core funding required to support integral local government services.
- Sustainability is a key part of this process and we need clarity on funding to sustain community support and youth violence prevention work. At the time the Serious Violence Strategy was launched in April 2018, councils were still waiting to receive their youth justice grant allocations for 2018/19. The Government must also ensure funding for the Troubled Families Programme is continued beyond 2020.

# Briefing

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## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Councils, working with local partners, have taken the lead on tackling serious violent crime in our communities. Across the country, councils have developed strong partnerships with the police, social care, safeguarding teams, schools, the voluntary sector and many others to improve the response to managing risk and safety. In March 2019 the LGA published *Breaking the Cycle in Youth Violence*, which highlights case studies from councils across the country.<sup>ii</sup>

For example, in Staffordshire the youth offending service is leading a prevention project to help identify children and young people who face poorer outcomes than their counterparts and intervening early with bespoke projects to help them thrive.

In Lincolnshire, the council is working in partnership with the NHS foundation trust as part of the Healthy Minds Lincolnshire Service which aims to support emotional wellbeing needs of young people. It focuses on early intervention, promoting resilience and the prevention of emotional wellbeing concerns escalating to mental health issues. Qualified practitioners deliver direct, evidence-based interventions to children and young people up to the age of 19 (25 if they are a care leaver or SEND) and priority is given to vulnerable groups.

In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the councils are involved in 'Operation Make Safe'. This includes fortnightly meetings with a range of safeguarding and local partners to review police intelligence and assess children who may be at risk of exploitation and the location and status of perpetrators. These councils also use a screening tool, originally developed to assess children at risk of child sexual exploitation, which has now been expanded to include child criminal exploitation. Any professional is able to use the tool, from universal services through to targeted and specialist services. This has helped to develop the statutory agencies' response to assessing risk and vulnerability.

Whilst progress has been made both nationally and locally to tackle serious violence, there is still more that needs to be done to combat this type of crime which is increasingly prevalent in our communities.

Public health services also have an important role to play in tackling serious violence. This includes looking at crime reduction, violence prevention, responses to violence, reducing levels of reoffending and preventing health inequalities. Councils' public health grant funding is being cut by £600 million between 2015/16 and 2019/2020 and we are calling on the Government to reverse these cuts to enable councils to deliver vital public health services and early intervention and prevention services

### **Knife Crime**

A recent report by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Knife Crime and Youth Services suggested a growing link between cuts to youth services and the country's knife crime epidemic.

This increase in children and young people tragically involved in knife crime and gang activity reinforces the need to invest in local services to support and work with children and young people to help them stay safe.

Councils' youth offending teams (YOTs) have an outstanding track record in working with children and young people to stop them coming into the youth justice system. Compared with the year ending March 2007, there are now 85 per cent fewer young people who are first time entrants into the youth justice system, and 74 per cent fewer young people in the average custodial population.<sup>iii</sup>

However, YOTs have been victims of their own success. As the numbers of young offenders has fallen, so has the grant from central government to continue the preventative work that caused the fall in the first place. As a result of these reductions in

government funding, council-run youth services have seen funding more than halved in real terms since 2010. It has fallen from £145 million in 2010/11 to just £70.7 million in 2019/20. These cuts mean that the youth justice grant now makes up only around a third of funding for YOTs. Council children's services budgets are facing a £3.1 billion funding gap by 2025. This means they are increasingly focused on those children in the most urgent need of protection. As a result YOTs are struggling to access the funding necessary to run vital, and successful, prevention and intervention schemes.

Councils must be given the resources they need to work with young people and prevent their involvement in crime in the first place, rather than simply picking up the pieces after offences have been committed. Government needs to address this in the forthcoming Spending Review.

### **Underage Knife Sales**

Research by the LGA recently found that six out of 10 retailers in some areas are breaking the law on underage knife sales<sup>iv</sup>. Councils have warned that a lack of funding for enforcement activity will make tackling the knife crime epidemic a huge challenge. These findings come as latest official figures show a 59 per cent rise in knife crime in England and Wales in the past five years.

The dedicated Home Office Prosecutions Fund, set up as part of the Serious Violence Strategy, does not provide enough help to council trading standards teams to enforce breaches of knife law sales, by in-store and online retailers in the longer term. The £1 million funding, split equally over two years, was given to 11 councils for in-store test purchase operations in 2018/19, as well as funding one council to run a national online test purchase operation.

The success of the test purchasing operations last year means most of the funding allocated for 2019/20 will have to be used to prosecute those businesses already caught making illegal knife sales. As a result, there will be only enough funding left to support further in-store test purchases by six councils, with no further online enforcement planned. Trading standards budgets and staffing have also been cut by around half since 2010, as a result of cuts to council funding. The LGA is calling for more funding to be allocated to the Prosecutions Fund to support enforcement activity in 2019/20 and for the Fund to be extended beyond 2020 as part of the Spending Review.

Councils' trading standards teams are also concerned that they don't have the necessary resources to enforce the requirements of the new Offensive Weapons Act. The Act makes it a criminal offence for knives and dangerous corrosives sold online to be delivered to anyone aged under 18 at a residential address, and for dangerous corrosive products, such as acids, to be sold to anyone under the age of 18.

Councils have new responsibilities for undertaking underage test purchase operations at the point of delivery for online knife sales and for enforcing restrictions on sales of acids and other corrosives. Councils also face the cost of providing advice and training for businesses about the new legal requirements. The LGA has called for the Government to fund the extra enforcement activity needed in light of the Offensive Weapons Act coming into force. We also need knife test purchase funding to be made available to many more councils to ensure the worst rogue knife retailers are brought before the courts.

### **The role of councils in supporting children and young people**

Councils are uniquely placed to build communities that are inclusive, cohesive and promote the life chances of everyone in them. They do this by tailoring more than 800 local services to the needs of their populations, creating bespoke solutions to specific, local challenges. This includes working to protect and improve outcomes for children and young people, such as safeguarding and child protection services, as well as services

like youth work and early intervention programmes to improve young people's health and wellbeing.

Many issues that impact on the wellbeing and life chances of children and young people fall outside of the remit of children's services, such as housing, health and employment. Ensuring that children and young people have access to opportunities and have their needs addressed must be seen as the responsibility of both the whole council and a wide range of partners, not just council children's services.

It is vital that the Government uses the Spending Review to deliver truly sustainable funding for local government. Investing in local services is good for the nation's prosperity and overall wellbeing. The LGA's #CouncilsCan campaign highlights the growing risk to vital local services if the Government does not invest in councils at the Spending Review.<sup>v</sup>

### **Funding for children's services and youth services**

Councils have worked hard to identify efficiencies and generate innovative solutions in response to reductions in central government funding totalling nearly £16 billion since 2010. Our analysis shows that councils face a funding gap of £8 billion by 2025, of which £3 billion is attributed to children's services.<sup>vi</sup> These council-wide funding pressures will have a significant impact on services that support children and young people's safety and wellbeing, including safeguarding, youth work, community safety, transport and culture and sports activities.

Funding awarded in the October budget, £410 million for adults and children's social care, and £84 million to roll out innovation projects in up to 20 councils over five years, is a step in the right direction. However, it will do little to alleviate the immediate and future pressures on services for some of the most vulnerable children and families in the vast majority of council areas.

As well as this, our analysis shows that funding for the Early Intervention Grant, which helps deliver early intervention work that can help head off serious challenges (including serious violence and involvement with organised crime), has been cut by almost £600 million since 2013 and is projected to drop a further £100 million by 2020.<sup>vii</sup>

Demand for urgent child protection services has increased sharply at the same time as funding has been cut. This includes an 83 per cent increase in the number of children on child protection plans between 2007 and 2017.<sup>viii</sup> Faced with this increased demand and reduced funding, children and young people are now increasingly reaching crisis point before they receive support,<sup>ix</sup> with councils forced to divert spending on preventative and early help work into services to protect children who are at immediate risk of harm.

Demand for support for pupils with SEND has also increased significantly and needs to be funded sustainably going forward. The Children Commissioner's report in February 2019 on '*The characteristics of gang-associated children and young people*' found that 40 per cent of children and young people associated with gangs had an identified SEN, and of those 80 per cent do not have a full statement or education, health and care (EHC) plan<sup>x</sup>. Research undertaken by the Isos Partnership on behalf of the LGA has found that councils are facing a high needs funding gap of £806 million for 2019-20, rising to almost £1.2 billion in 2020-21. We are concerned that unless additional funding is found, councils will be unable to meet their statutory duties to support children with SEND.

### **Delivering youth services**

As local authority budgets have reduced and demand for services has increased, councils have been forced to make difficult decisions about how to use increasingly limited resources. In many areas, services for young people are increasingly targeted at

those in most need to try to ensure that they receive the support they need to flourish. While this targeting is essential to make the best use of resources and make sure those in most need are supported, this has left limited funding available for universal youth services. More than 600 youth centres have closed, and nearly 139,000 youth services places were lost, in the UK between 2012 and 2016<sup>xi</sup>. Councils were forced to cut spending on local youth services by 52 per cent, from £652 million in 2010/11 to £352 million in 2017/18, as a result of government funding cuts.

Scaling back these universal services can mean that opportunities to support some young people are missed. Providers of services for young people have an important role to play in building trusted relationships which can enable young people to share concerns that they may feel unable to raise with their family or those perceived as authority figures such as teachers or social workers. They can then be directed to the right opportunities and support to help them make a positive transition to adulthood.

Most youth provision is now delivered through the National Citizen Service, which received £1.2 billion funding from central government between 2016 and 2020, 95 per cent of central government spending on youth services. While this is a good programme, it is a short term summer programme that will only reach a relatively small number of young people, with take up at only 12 per cent of eligible young people in 2016. It needs to be part of a broader package of provision, and have called for some of the funding to be devolved to councils to support year-round provision that meets the needs of a wider group of young people locally.

### **Additional Government funding**

The Government has made a number of welcome announcements regarding funding to tackle issues around crime and young people that local authorities, Police and Crime Commissioners or other partners can submit bids for. This includes:

- funding through the Serious Violence Strategy,
- the Early Intervention Youth Fund,
- the Trusted Relationships Fund, and
- the Youth Endowment Fund.

Although ring-fenced pots of funding can be useful, one-off funds are most effective when there is adequate time to submit bids. The funding should be made available, and expected to be spent, within a reasonable time period. Often the bidding process for these funds requires strategic partnership arrangements to be put in place, between local government, the voluntary sector, the police, or wider practitioners. This level of collaboration can take time to establish and the bidding process should reflect this.

Sustainability is a key part of this process, so it is important for local authorities to receive clarity on future engagement in order to sustain community support and youth violence prevention work. For example, at the time the Serious Violence Strategy was launched in April 2018, councils were still waiting to receive their youth justice grant allocations for 2018/19. This is vital funding used to support young people and help keep them away from criminality in the first place. Whilst announcements of new funds are welcome, this should not replace the core funding required to support integral local government services.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/relationship-between-family-violence-and-youth-offending>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/breaking-cycle-youth-violence>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-annual-statistics-2016-to-2017>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-six-10-retailers-selling-knives-children-some-areas-prosecution-fund-runs-dry>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/spending-review-2019>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/councils-face-almost-ps8-billion-funding-black-hole-2025>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures/bright-futures-childrens-services/childrens-services-funding-facts>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need-2016-to-2017>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/support-for-children-and-families/revolving-door/>

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.isospartnership.com/uploads/files/LGA%20HN%20report%20published%2012.12.18.pdf> (See page 31)

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2016/08/23996.pdf>