

## **Young people in London question Commissioner Ian Blair**

On 27th March 2008 Sir Ian Blair, Commissioner, MPS, attended the last of the hearings with young Londoners to take place as part of the MPA Youth Scrutiny.

During the evening's lively discussion and debate many young people wrote questions down for Sir Ian on post-it notes for him to answer after the event. The Commissioner has taken the time to respond to each of these questions and comments personally.

Below is a full transcript of the questions young people raised in writing and the Commissioner's response.

***"This is a fantastic forum for young people to express themselves. In what ways will the Met be taking the comments on board? Will the Met be acting on these comments, and, if so, how?"***

Whilst this is an MPA Youth Scrutiny, the MPS have been actively engaged and will be taking away much from the process to help inform our Youth Strategy and help us learn how to better engage with youths in London. The ideas, suggestions and comments will all be considered and discussed and wherever appropriate be implemented.

***"It takes a young person to know a young person. I think you should bring young people on some cases, to deal with cases in which a young person helping would be beneficial. Thank you"***

Members of the Met Youth Advisory Group (MYAG) help the organisation address corporate issues affecting young people, such as in the development of policy or in managing a critical incident following a 'youth' murder. The members of this group are all young people who are fully engaged with youth groups or other similar groups in their own right.

The MYAG plays a crucial part in advising and suggesting solutions to the issues and concerns of young people. It continues to assist with various issues, such as critical incidents, and 'stop and search' procedures.

***"Do you think de-classifying cannabis was not a wise move and do you think it has caused more problems with more young people now smoking it?"***

Cannabis has not been 'de-classified' and it remains a controlled drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. However, the classification of cannabis was 'reduced' from class B to class C in January 2004 after consideration by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD).

The question posed suggests that, as a consequence, more young people are now smoking cannabis. If this is the case, it may be the result of a general misunderstanding amongst many young people that, despite reclassification, the possession of cannabis is still illegal and it is an offence for which they can be prosecuted.

After being asked by the Home Office to once again review the classification, the ADMD has recently been reported in the media as considering it unnecessary to change the current classification of cannabis, and further reports that Government is at odds with this view.

The MPS ultimately takes its lead from the Home Office and the ACMD. We recognise that the strength of cannabis has increased over the last few years and we continue to actively enforce the law on illegal possession, supply, production and importation by work at a local Safer Neighbourhood level, through to working with national and international law enforcement. It is acknowledged that there is widespread public concern over the increasing strength of cannabis and the harm it can cause. Therefore it is right that we, the MPS, remain responsive to these concerns.

***"What are the plans for the Met Youth Advisory Group in the future and how do you plan on getting other officers in other parts of London to the same standard as those in NSY (supposedly) ie trickle-down effect?"***

The plan for the Met Youth Advisory Group (MYAG) is that it will continue to meet on a regular basis and provide the MPS with independent advice.

Borough Commanders are encouraged to consult closely with young people and to develop partnerships to help inform MPS decision-making at a local level. They and their officers work closely with other partners, such as the Youth Service, Education Authorities, Youth Offending Teams and schools in order to promote effective youth engagement.

Some boroughs have their own Youth Independent advisory Groups. The MPS Age Strand in the Diversity and Citizen Focus Directorate, with the aid of MYAG members, has provided support and guidance to those boroughs wishing to convene their own advisory groups.

***"On a positive note, the Hub youth centre in Hounslow West has a good relationship with the Cranford Safer Neighbourhood Team, with regular visits to our centre, a football match planned tomorrow and a trip to Imber Court in the holidays."***

Thank you for this feedback. This is an example of a local Safer Neighbourhood Team working with young people in a way that provides positive engagement. It is very important that occasions like the football match are not singular events and that everyone works together to continue to engage and continue to build trust and confidence.

***"The 'mass media' is a broad subject to define. From your point of view, what sector in particular is most responsible for youth crime and activity? What is the MPS doing to counter it?"***

The Metropolitan Police Service believes that every section of the media has a responsibility for providing accurate reporting within our communities and there is not one type that is more important than another. With regards to the youth media we support a wide variety of approaches as no single method can reach out to everyone. We therefore adopt a wide variety of methods which include text messaging, websites, radio and TV station advertising and magazine articles to name but a few. Our approach is very much one that provides information

and awareness of the issues affecting youths in London as opposed to the negative portrayal or stigmatisation of youths generally.

***"Many statistics show percentages of ethnic minorities being searched. Why are there no statistics showing off-duty police officers being searched, as well as on-duty? Does it happen, or is it non-existent?"***

The MPS publishes stop and search data every month on our website ([www.met.police.uk/stopandsearch](http://www.met.police.uk/stopandsearch)), broken down for each London borough by ethnicity, age, and gender. We do not record or collate data about the occupation of persons stopped and this will include police officers whether they are on or off duty. There is a "Codes of Practice" under the "Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984" that governs the exercise of statutory powers of stop and search by police officers and these give guidelines about what is required by law to be recorded as well as other information.

From another perspective I should explain that police officers retain their legislative powers whether on or off duty. This provides the communities they work and live in, the protection from those who break the law. Thus when an officer is off duty and they conduct a stop and search they must record the encounter in the same way as if they are on duty and similarly the member of the public who is stopped by an off duty officer has a right to have a copy of the record. For this reason there is no distinction between records of searches conducted by on or off duty officers.

***"Are ASBOs a badge of honour for young people?"***

Anti-social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) continue to be used successfully across London both as a means to stop existing anti-social behaviour and as a deterrent to future acts. Their use is one of a number of effective and successful options available to local partnerships as a means for tackling behaviour identified by the community as being unacceptable. In the early days, ASBOs were issued in isolation. In other words an agency support package was not put in place for the individual or his or her family. The fact that the criminal justice process dealt inconsistently with "breach" offences was not helpful either.

The ASBO applied for today, especially with regards to young people has evolved out of years of close monitoring, scrutiny and legislative change into a more preventative approach, which in most cases included a package of support with the main intention of preventing breaches. Support packages target the under-lying issues, which may be behind the behaviour and supporting the parents in taking responsibility in preventing the unacceptable behaviour from continuing. This has had the effect of ensuring that individuals and their families realise the seriousness of their actions.

***"Are Taser guns the future of policing?"***

The Taser is a single shot weapon designed to temporarily incapacitate a subject through the use of an electrical current, which temporarily interferes with the body's neuromuscular system.

An initial Taser trial commenced on the 21st April 2003, for a period of 12 months. This

examined the use of Taser as a less lethal option alongside conventional firearms (within a firearms authority). The MPS was part of this trial. In September 2004, following independent evaluation, the Home Secretary authorised Taser for all Forces as a less lethal option for police operations involving the deployment of Authorised Firearms Officers (AFO). All armed commands within the MPS are now able to deploy Taser.

In 2006 a further submission was presented to the Home Office seeking an extension to the operational deployment of Taser outside of the firearms criteria. Having considered this submission, the Home Secretary agreed to a 10 Force pilot for specially trained officers, which commenced in September 2007.

The MPS selected the Territorial Support Group (TSG) to participate in the trial as they have enhanced supervision and other tactical options available ie use of shields. The TSG commenced the trial on 1st December 2007. The Taser pilot will be reviewed post September 2008 by the Home Office who will then review all usage prior to any decision on the future deployment of the weapon. At this stage the Home Office have made it clear that the current pilot will not lead to the automatic issues of Taser to the police service.

***"Is the Wellingborough Prison visits scheme to be extended?"***

Any scheme in relation to prison visits is primarily the responsibility of the Prison Service. However, any scheme which assists in the rehabilitation of offenders is of interest to the Metropolitan Police Service. We have therefore contacted Wellingborough Prison to find out about this scheme but their response has been that they do nothing differently to any other prison. If you are able to provide more specific information then we would be very happy to make contact with the prison again.

***"What actions are the Met going to take after the conference?"***

Whilst this is an MPA Youth Scrutiny, the MPS have been actively engaged and will be taking away much from the process to help inform our Youth Strategy and help us learn how to better engage with youths in London. The ideas, suggestions and comments will all be considered and discussed and wherever appropriate be implemented.

***"I believe I have been a victim of institutional racism and prejudice, since I have been stopped and profiled for being suspected to be a TERRORIST! What are you going to do about it?"***

If you have been a victim of institutional racism then this is a matter which I take very seriously and it is not something I can discuss in open correspondence. I would therefore like to offer the opportunity to discuss this matter personally with Superintendent Nick Jupp who leads a team of people who examine and scrutinise the use of stop and search across London. Superintendent Jupp can be contacted by writing to him at: 15th Floor, empress State Building, Empress Approach, Lillie Road, London, SW6 1TR.

Alternatively, if you do not wish to speak to a police officer, you can contact your local Stop and Search Community Monitoring Group, who are not police officers. John Roberts from the

Metropolitan Police Authority, who chaired the forum, can facilitate this for you. He can be contacted on 020 7202 0184.

***"I went to Sir John Cass's Foundation Primary School, and within its curriculum for Year 5 children, we had a police organisation called DARE (Drug Abuse, Resistance Education) as a youth provision and to create a positive relationship with police. Why do not more schools have this?"***

Drug Education Teams within Local Authorities deliver drugs and alcohol education in both primary and secondary schools across London. To do this, they often enlist the support of external organisations and DARE are but one of those projects in London. This is not a police organisation but the messages in schools are often delivered in partnership with the local police for the very reasons that you outline in your question. I am glad you support this type of work taking place in schools.

***"I know that this is easier said than done, but I think that what is needed isn't just youth clubs but youth workers who can be real role models because I think that the main reasons why young people become offenders are: lack of decent parenting, lack of a sense of identity, lack of a decent role model. These factors lead young people to become involved in poisonous social groups such as gangs where they can find some sort of form of this, leading to an almost inevitable perpetuation of the problem as the only place to go from here is into criminal activity."***

I would like to thank you for your comment and feedback.

***"Why should we be stopped and searched if we have done nothing wrong? Isn't that wasting police time?"***

This is an understandable feeling about stop and search. The power to stop and search serves two principle purposes. Firstly and of paramount importance, it allows police to detect crime. Without the power police would have to arrest a person and maybe convey them to a police station in order to carry out an investigation. This would have an even more adverse impact. Secondly it has a deterrent effect. A criminal is less inclined to commit an act if they know that an officer has a power to stop and search, as they would run a high risk of being caught. With sensitive use of the power, police are able to assess whether further police action is necessary. Our ethos and training is geared towards ensuring the encounter is conducted with a mutual respect. We are asked by communities to actively drive down criminality especially when guns and knives are involved. That is why the objective for police in respect of stop and search is to achieve the 'trust and confidence' of the community. When and if this is achieved, we will have struck the right balance in preserving the rights of both individuals and communities.

***"Aren't a lot of youth going to prison, coming out, and then going back in again?"***

The Metropolitan Police Service, through our Operation Emerald Team, works closely in partnership with all of London's Criminal Justice system agencies to ensure that both victims and witnesses are at the heart of the Criminal Justice Service, that the highest quality of

investigations are delivered and streamlined processes achieve timely and successful prosecution outcomes. The Metropolitan Police Service also works closely with the London Youth Crime Prevention Board (LYCPB) to reduce the number of young people who are at risk of harming themselves and others through crime. The LYCPB has a number of objectives that include influencing national debate and direction on youth crime prevention and harnessing the voice of young people to improve the safety of young people themselves.

Both the MPS and the LYCPB are keen to explore robust pre-court interventions which divert young people from the criminal justice system where appropriate, but also give confidence to victims. The LYCPB are working with national partners to identify alternative or pre-court youth justice models for testing, such as building on restorative justice principles and practices, be schools/community rather than court based and aim to direct young people away from the criminal justice system where possible. The MPS are also piloting initiatives on four MPS boroughs around restorative justice approaches and are heavily involved in Safer Schools Partnerships (SSP). SSPs are a collaborative approach between a school, police and other local agencies working towards the reduction of crime, anti-social behaviour and victimisation amongst young people in schools and their wider communities.

***"When will this gang disruption programme roll out? Did you consult the community, and will this be another way to enforce the shoot to kill policy if this goes wrong?"***

Operation Pathways is not a gang disruption programme; it is based on focused deterrence, gang members will be given consistent messages by the community, law enforcement agencies, statutory bodies and the voluntary sector. The messages are: "The violence will stop." "If the violence does not stop, there will be severe consequences" and "We will do everything we can to help you leave a violent, gang-related lifestyle." It is hoped that Operation Pathways will be in effect during early Autumn 2008, but no official timescale has been announced yet.

There are three strands to Operation Pathways - Consequences of Actions, Help If You Want It, and The Moral Voice Of The Community. This last strand is focused purely on community consultation and mobilisation. Pathways will not be a success unless the communities involved are fully supportive of it, as they will be the people who deliver the key messages. The Moral Voice strand is in its planning phase and communities are being consulted.

There is no 'shoot to kill' policy in London. The aim of Pathways is to reduce the amount of serious violence associated with gangs by mobilising local communities, delivering consistent messages, offering help to those who ask for it, and arresting and prosecuting those who choose to continue engaging in serious violence. If we don't achieve this, the result will be a continuation of street level violence rather than the anticipated reduction.

In addition to Operation Pathways, there are numerous other initiatives being run locally to tackle serious youth violence and to prevent young people from becoming the victims of crime. If you would like to get involved with any youth activities on your own borough you could email or ring your borough council and ask for the contact details of your local community safety manager, alternatively you could contact your local safer neighbourhood team via the Metropolitan Police Website, '[www.met.police.uk](http://www.met.police.uk)'

***"Why don't young people be killed and go to hell when they've killed somebody or suffer or pay lots of money for killing somebody?"***

The recent murders of young people in London in 2007/8 have been tragic, perhaps even more so because many of them have been committed by other young people. Some people have raised concerns that the small numbers of young people who are committing these terrible offences are 'getting away with it' and not being punished because of their age. However, this is just not the case. It's important to remember that, whilst this country does not believe in what's called 'capital punishment' (that is - killing someone as a punishment for committing a murder), the criminal justice system in England and Wales does take any offence of violence, particularly murder, incredibly seriously. If a young person murders someone, and they are found guilty by a court of the murder, then they will receive a very long prison sentence in a Young Offenders Institution.

For young people, the length of prison sentence can be anywhere up to the adult maximum sentence, which in some cases can be life imprisonment. While the young person is serving their prison sentence, they will need to undergo intensive programmes of work ensuring that they face up to the consequences of their actions, so that when they are eventually released, they do not commit any further offences. Whilst in prison, and when they are eventually let out back into the community, young offenders also undertake unpaid community work (called reparation) in order to put something more positive back into the community. In some cases, they or their parents are also ordered by the courts to pay money (compensation) to the victim's family. Whilst none of this will sadly bring back the young person who has been tragically killed, it does mean that young people who commit serious offences are strongly punished by having their freedom taken away for long periods of time.

Locking up dangerous young people who have committed murder is part of the way that we make sure we can keep other young people safe. However, the most important thing we can do is try to make sure that these murders don't happen in the first place. All of the criminal justice agencies in London, including the police, courts and local Youth Offending teams are working closely within every London borough to make sure that youth crime prevention programmes are in place to help young people stay away from crime, by providing them with positive things to do, incentives to stay out of trouble and support when they need it. This work is being led by a new London Youth Crime Prevention Board which has the job of ensuring that good prevention programmes are in place across London, with a strong focus on safe schools and colleges. An important part of this work is finding out from young people themselves what they think would help to make them feel safer, as well as how they would like the youth justice system to work in London. The London criminal justice board, which is made up of all London's criminal justice agencies, will be working hard this year to consult young people on what they think a good youth justice system looks like and how we can work with them to make it better.

Every death of a young person is one too many. We hope that by working together with young people and the local communities, we can help to significantly reduce these tragic deaths and give young people in London a much brighter future.

***"Teenagers used to go to youth clubs but the youth clubs got demolished and turned into houses for people to live in which gives them no choice but to go around in gangs. Why can't they do good things, not nasty things?"***

I will always support the provision of activities in which youths can engage in a positive and constructive way, and youth clubs do provide such an activity. However, a youth club does not meet the needs of every individual. For this reason, the Metropolitan Police support a variety of activities that not only provide youths with something to do but also provides skills in leadership, citizenship and even educational qualifications. This is why we support programmes such as Kickz, Metrack and Miss Dorothy.com.