

Children and Young People Committee

Inquiry into: Safe Places to Play and Hangout

Response from ACPO Cymru

Children and young people need safe places where they can meet and interact with each other. The social interaction of 'hanging out' where young people meet is a normal process of growing up but in the absence of suitable locations and structures often results in them using places not intended for this purpose. This often creates tensions between adults and young people. For example, some people in our communities see groups of young people as being frightening and fear they will cause damage, graffiti or nuisance behaviour. To some, even three or four youths sitting on a park bench or at a bus stop can appear intimidating. We should not ignore the importance of these perceptions because the fear is often genuine and does undermine quality of life.

The need to socialise is a part of growing up and children and young people often resent being seen as a problem and frequently complain about a lack of facilities and of 'nowhere to go and nothing to do'. For many they simply want to meet up with friends in a location which is safe and near to where they live. For most 'hanging out' does not involve any sinister motives even when the behaviour becomes noisy and boisterous. Whilst clubs and youth organisations are popular they tend to open for limited periods which means young people have to find something else to do for the rest of the time. For many all they require is somewhere dry and located in places where they will not come into conflict with adults or the police.

The absence of suitable locations and structures for young people to meet and hang out often results in them using places not intended for this purpose. Complaints about youths congregating near shops and community buildings or playing ball games around homes and cars are frequent. PACT meetings are now held in every neighbourhood in Wales and anti social behaviour caused by young people is frequently the number one concern of communities.

The tension between young people and adults is often based on mistaken perceptions and fear of crime and anti social behaviour. In these circumstances adults expect the police to resolve the problem quickly. In most cases a minimum expectation is that the youths will be moved on regardless of whether the problem will be displaced or not. That short term solution is not effective as young people often move back as soon as the police have left. These local tensions can escalate and result in more serious offences and damage.

In response to these issues both police and local councils face difficult issues. For the councils in seeking to provide safe places for young people, there is a requirement to cater for a number of age groups. In many areas councils provide play equipment for young children but often find damage caused by older children who feel little respect for the equipment. In some areas facilities have been provided for older children which are well used but because of the poor choice of location has resulted in tensions with adults. For example, one valley community in South Wales has provided a skate board park for young people but located it next to a bowling green and near to a residential area. The result has been ongoing conflict between bowlers and young people during the day and from local residents in the early evening who complain of noise and rowdy behaviour.

For the police, we recognise that interventions which merely displace a problem do not provide solutions. The lack of safe locations for young people to congregate in often places the police in the invidious position of having to come up with short term fixes to problems which require a community solution. This is what the PACT process aims to do. Too often however, communities engaged in PACT do not see young people as part of a solution.

Our experience in the police service is that where young people are perceived to be a problem then they need to be involved in finding a solution. Too often this is not the case and the end result is a product which young people either do not want or do not use or is in a location which creates differing types of problems as shown in the skateboard example.

There is a huge role for those who are developing and designing areas where youths are likely to congregate, in ensuring that an area is economically viable, socially cohesive and safe. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 places a duty on local authorities including planning departments to consider Crime and Community Safety in most decisions they make. Providing facilities for young people to reduce crime and improve community safety are issues that should be considered by planners but too often are not. In the four Welsh forces, **Police Crime Prevention Design Advisors** are able to assess play areas and provide a certificate to those that are made safer because of their design. The Secure by Design Award guidance developed by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) for playing areas is appended and illustrates the range of factors that need to be taken into account.

A good example of a partnership approach to developing a safe, secure, harmonious and sustainable area for young people to use was seen in Dinas Powys in the Vale of Glamorgan which resulted from repeated complaints of youth annoyance and anti social behaviour: -

Youths were causing problems at the local Castle Road shops, and as a result one business premises was empty and others could not be sold.

Residents were reluctant to use the shops with large numbers of youths congregating outside.

The play area for the younger children was overgrown and used by teenagers - the council were looking to flatten the park as it was costing a large amount to repair.

Multi agency work took place

The local officer worked with the council and obtained a number of grants.

The older youths were engaged and were involved in designing a youth shelter and small Multi-Use Games Area. The area has surveillance but is far enough from homes so that noise is minimal

The council repaired the toddler's area and made improvements to the local shops.

The result is a far more cohesive community with all amenities well used by those they were intended for.

A second good example is being developed in Caerau, Mid Glamorgan, where police, Community First workers and other partners have engaged with young people complaining of 'nowhere to go and nothing to do'. Work has focused on a facility which had been provided for young people but which had fallen into disrepair and had been vandalised. Prior to investing in this facility young people were asked how they would 'police' it themselves so that it would be properly used and benefit a range of young people. This engagement provided the reassurance to upgrade the facility which is due to open this month.

An example from North Wales highlights the importance of the partnership approach. The Rhosllanerchrugog Community Council, the Elected Members and the local policing team have worked together to develop an area known as Ponciau Banks. The police assistance was essentially providing a visible policing presence in the area as each element of the development was completed, providing statistical information and anecdotal evidence to the Council/Councillors to assist with funding bids, and engagement with young people to help glean the type of facilities they would like to have. Facilities were made available in stages with a total investment in the region of £1 million, and officially opened in June 2009. The safety element included CCTV cameras, improved lighting, and sustained policing presence. It also forms part of regular environmental audits conducted by the local policing team in company with streetscene and Councillors. The Environmental audit process ensures any litter, graffiti, dog fouling etc. is removed quickly (albeit we have had no incidents of graffiti) and the general environment maintained to a high standard. Evening audits identify any defective lighting/environmental improvements for the evening time users. Ponciau Banks now consists of a Childs play area, basketball court, tennis courts, bandstand, BMX track, and a mushroom. The BMX track is seen as one of the best in England and Wales attracting a team from Manchester and used as a preparation site for the Olympic team. In terms of usage it is used for any major community event and in any one week we see in the region of 200 young people using the location, this number can be trebled in school holidays.

In conclusion, our experience is that young people need to socialise but in doing so also need to become integrated into their communities. If we are not able to

achieve this then not only do we create short term problems but we may well be storing up problems for the future. There is a need for places to play and hang out which are not only safe but also sustainable. These can only be created through genuine partnerships which involve young people.