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Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

(Via email)

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A new model for preventing violence in London

Following the spike in violence in London this year, the Police and Crime Committee has focused its efforts on understanding the underlying causes of violence and violent behaviour; and how best to reduce and, ultimately, prevent it.

The current level of violence in London is not a new or sudden phenomenon. We heard it has been "a year or 18 months in the making". As a committee we have been warning about the rise in violent crime for several years, particularly since 2014 when the number of violent offences in the capital began to rise.¹

We welcome the establishment of the Met's Violent Crime Taskforce as a way of tackling the immediate spike in violence; and your announcement about the establishment of a Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) for the capital, which will move toward a 'public health approach' to violence. We regret that action like this has not been taken sooner.

We remain concerned about the lack of detail around what the VRU will mean in practice. And we are concerned that the narrative around the VRU may give some Londoners the impression that it is set up and taking action, when in fact it is very much in the early stages of development.

¹ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 24 May 2018

The DMPC told us that the VRU will “add some extra capacity, facilitation and support” to boroughs and others involved in reducing violence.² But does that mean, for example, that the VRU will be a hub to spread knowledge and good practice, a funding provider, a commissioner or deliverer of services, all of the above – or something else entirely?

Our work with front-line practitioners, other professionals, victims and former offenders indicates that London needs to drastically improve its approach to tackling the root causes of violence, to safeguarding those at risk, and to delivering justice for victims. The establishment of a dedicated unit such as the VRU could, if done well, provide the new direction that London needs. But a re-branding of existing programmes and policies will mean a missed opportunity – and getting it wrong in the early stages will only serve to damage the confidence of Londoners.

Below we set out our findings on the causes of violence and the guiding principles that we believe are needed to shape the VRU. By addressing our recommendations and following the principles we are setting out, we believe that you and those involved in the forthcoming VRU will be better able to tackle the causes of violence and deliver a real difference to Londoners’ lives.

Addressing the causes of violence

Much of our work has involved speaking to different people about the causes of violence and the ways that these causes can be tackled. We have been particularly struck by comments about the level of violence in the capital becoming more extreme, with some people using “whatever they can get their hands on” to commit violence.³

We heard passionate testimony that issues such as gangs and weapons are not the problems that we need to address, but that the mindset which leads people to those things is what we should be addressing.⁴ As Leone Buncombe from the Rugby Portobello Trust told us, the solution is about getting individuals at risk “to understand that conflict does happen, but you need to find a positive way to channel that”.⁵ **The core driver for the work of the VRU must be about changing the mindset that violence is acceptable or a normal way of acting, and reaching out to protect and challenge those who are vulnerable to developing that mindset.**

It was suggested at our round table meeting in Hackney in July 2018 that violence needs its own Prevent Strategy. Building on this, we suggest that the practical work of the VRU to tackle the causes of violence be developed using the ‘Four P’ model (Prevent, Pursue, Protect, Prepare) as its basis, as used in other areas such as counter terrorism.⁶ The evidence we received has helped us to think about how this approach might work.

² Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 4 October 2018

³ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 24 May 2018

⁴ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 20 September 2018

⁵ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 24 May 2018

⁶ Home Office, Counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST), June 2018

Preventing violence: the root causes

There is broad agreement that the early experiences of individuals within the family and during childhood can affect a person's mindset and are the real root causes of violence, alongside other issues such as poor health. The focus on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)—the term given to traumatic situations children live through—is a helpful one and we are pleased to see it referenced in the context of the VRU.⁷

A focus on these root causes will help people to understand the reasons why the models used in places like Scotland and Birmingham could work here, despite London being so different. If we are truly looking at the root causes of violence—those adverse experiences—then the model can be similar, it is just that the symptoms have manifested themselves differently.

And focusing on these root causes of violence will help to bring partners round the table much more easily. During our visit to Birmingham to learn about violence prevention in the West Midlands, we heard that it provides a language and identity that stakeholders can relate their roles to, increasing their engagement and understanding as to how they can play their part.⁸

We are concerned that much of the discussion to date, while talking about dealing with the causes of violence, has focused on tackling the symptoms and consequences. The Assembly's Health Committee recently concluded that the symptoms of ACEs—poor physical and mental health and disruptive lifestyles—are mostly treated as they arise, but proactive and preventative interventions will be more effective in the longer term. That committee asked that you explore options to pilot an ACE hub to tackle ACEs in London.⁹ This sits very closely to what we expect the VRU to do. **We recommend that the VRU—and your longer-term work on tackling violence—explicitly focuses on tackling ACEs.**

Pursuing violent offenders

We agree wholeheartedly that enforcement needs to be an integral part of any model for violence prevention. People need to see immediate action, as well as action to tackle issues in the longer term.

We commend the Violent Crime Taskforce for the work it is doing. We visited the Met's Command and Control centre in Lambeth to find out more about the taskforce and its work and we were impressed by the level of dedication, intelligence sharing and teamwork between not only units in the Met but also across London's three police forces.

We also note that the taskforce appears to be having some effect and has been a contributing factor to a reduction in violence recently. Since the introduction of the taskforce the monthly frequency of knife crimes and homicides has started to reduce.¹⁰ While there

⁷ Adverse Childhood experiences include physical or emotional abuse; physical or emotional neglect; sexual abuse; living around domestic violence or engaging in substance misuse; a parent living with mental illness; and not being raised by both parents, either through separation or incarceration.

⁸ Police and Crime Committee visit to Birmingham, 7 September 2018

⁹ London Assembly Health Committee, [Healthy First Steps](#), July 2018

¹⁰ Metropolitan Police, [Stats and Data](#)

are always going to be periods of volatility, the latest data shows that the average number of homicides per month in the past four months is eight, compared with 16 in the first four months of this year. Knife crime with injury also fell significantly between July and September.¹¹

But this intense period of activity has come at a cost. The Commissioner told us that “there is a resource change and we have had to rob Peter to pay Paul to put people into the Violent Crime Taskforce.”¹² It is also having an impact on officers themselves. When we first started our investigation in April, you suggested to us that “the police are knackered.”¹³ The Commissioner has said that there has been a rise in officers using the Met’s counselling service.¹⁴ We are concerned not only about the impact of the intense focus on violent crime on other areas of Met activity but also on the resilience of officers who are having to work in this field.

The taskforce cannot continue forever. And as the public health approach becomes embedded we hope that the need for such a response will be reduced. But now, and possibly for the medium term, it is necessary.

Protecting people from the wider risk factors

We have heard a range of suggestions as to the causes of violence that can be described as catalysts: those wider risk factors that can increase a person’s likelihood of being involved in violence, either as a victim or perpetrator. There are certain specific factors that we heard about many times from many people. These include a lack of diversionary activities; a lack of well-funded youth services and projects; the use of exclusions in schools; and the influence of social media.

We were particularly struck by comments about the impact of exclusion on the risk of young people becoming involved in violence, and particularly about it being considered a safeguarding concern. Kiran Gill, Chief Executive of The Difference, for example, has said that “these children need an intervention that helps keep them safe but often they get less support and find themselves in a less regulated part of the sector.”¹⁵ In a recent review of 60 serious cases involving young people in Croydon, it was found that none of the young people involved in the reviews had a permanent place in school.¹⁶ The Assembly’s Education Panel recently visited two education centres run by TBAP Multi-Agency Trust. The centres provide managed intervention programmes for KS3 and KS4 learners who are at risk of permanent exclusion. This includes tailored one-to-one and small group interventions with a focus on Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE), literacy and numeracy. The centres work closely with local authorities, make referrals to specialist services and arrange support workers for the families of the learners – garnering a holistic package of support around the young person. **We recommend that the VRU focuses on exclusions at an early stage in its work programme.**

¹¹ Metropolitan Police, [Stats and data](#)

¹² Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 4 July 2018

¹³ Police and Crime Committee briefing, 11 April 2018

¹⁴ Evening Standard, [Met Police Commissioner Cressida Dick says there 'is still room for improvement' as force celebrates 100 years of women policing in London](#), 2 November 2018

¹⁵ Huffington Post, [How A Spike In School Exclusions Could Be Fuelling Knife Crime In London](#), 14 April 2018

¹⁶ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 20 September 2018

Many commentators have criticised the role of social media in promoting violence. The Commissioner, for example, has said there is "definitely something about the impact of social media in terms of people being able to go from slightly angry with each other to 'fight' very quickly" and that gangs who post on social media or share videos provoking rivals can glamorise violence.¹⁷ This involves not only videos that promote specific violent acts, but the use of social media platforms more widely to enable or promote violence. **We recommend that both you and the VRU call on social media providers to take down all content that explicitly calls for the use of violence.**

While social media companies still allow this kind of material to be published online, we need to reduce the risk of it influencing someone to participate in violent activity. We were struck by comments made by the young people we spoke to, namely that social media can fuel impulsivity and cause situations to escalate.¹⁸ **We recommend that the VRU explore how critical thinking skills can be best delivered via schools and elsewhere, so that young people especially are able to respond more positively when encountering material online that could encourage violence.**

It is on the 'Protect' strand where we feel your efforts are most focused, through initiatives like your Young Londoners Fund and Knife Crime Community Seed Funding, and through actions you have taken such as providing knife wands to schools. Although it is too early to evaluate these initiatives, they are the kinds of interventions we heard were needed and will likely go some way to addressing the risk factors.

However, we were particularly struck by what we heard about the commissioning of projects and limitations of current funding arrangements:

"One of the biggest issues we have at the moment on a local level is that there are multiple funding streams and multiple avenues, none of which are joined up, all of which are funding very similar things. [...] Everybody is trying to find resources and scrambling around, but there is no co-ordination of it. [...] The money is not going to the right organisations and there is no strategic goal for what we are trying to do in each local area. Instead, we are just hoping that a year of funding will do it."¹⁹

This comment was not unique, with many expressing to us their frustration with current commissioning processes. **We recommend that the VRU takes positive action to alleviate this. This could include, for example, being able to signpost people and organisations to available funding streams to tackle violence; publicise new funding opportunities; or setting out where funding is already being prioritised, to avoid duplication.**

Preparing and building resilience

The negative consequences of violence can exacerbate further problems. This includes, for example, fear of being attacked leading to there being more weapons on our streets. We heard that "young people are now carrying knives who are not necessarily involved in gang

¹⁷ BBC News, [Met Police chief: Social media leads children to violence](#), 31 March 2018

¹⁸ Police and Crime Committee round table meeting, 24 July 2018; and visit to Birmingham, 7 September 2018

¹⁹ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 24 May 2018

life, they are carrying them because they are scared” and for self-defence.²⁰ We have repeatedly said that there needs to be a multi-agency approach put in place to reassure people when incidents take place: one that does not only rely on the police descending on an area to provide that reassurance.²¹

We have heard about the importance of community mediators in tackling violence: those who are well known in the community, and among those at risk, who can resolve and manage any tensions locally. During our visit to Birmingham one officer told us that the community mediation approach is one of the single most impressive things he has seen work. We also note the positive impact that mediators have had as part of public health approaches in places like Chicago. **A local mediation service is critical to help build resilience and prevent violence from escalating when incidents occur. We recommend that the VRU enables this kind of model at a community level.**

Trust between the police and communities is especially important in building resilience. But we know that the relationship between the police and communities, particularly in relation to trust, has deteriorated.²² The reasons we heard for this included frequent turnover of local police officers; a lack of understanding of local culture and community among officers; knowing that the police will be held accountable when mistakes occur; and heavy-handed policing.

This is one area where neighbourhood officers play a critical role. They should be known by local people, know their local area, and be able to build trust among their residents. Practically, this means being at the forefront of communications with residents on violence. ‘Meet and greet’ sessions in neighbourhoods conducted by the Violent Crime Taskforce, for example, might be better headed up by local officers. This could help to build a more positive ongoing relationship and, in turn, give people the confidence to talk to their officers about who is at risk of violence. **The Met should ensure that local officers are at the forefront of communications with their residents about violence.**

We recognise, however, that there will be occasions where individuals may wish to report anonymously. **The Met and the Mayor should examine what more they can do to make people aware of how they can report concerns and incidents anonymously.**

The wider development of the VRU

The announcement of the VRU presents an opportunity to do things differently. We have explored what such a model might mean in practice. We have developed the following principles that we recommend you adopt, to gain buy in and commitment to the new model, and to demonstrate change.

²⁰ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 24 May 2018

²¹ See, for example, Police and Crime Committee, [Serious Youth Violence](#)

²² See [MOPAC Quarterly Performance Update Report, Quarter 2 2018-19](#), November 2018

LONDONASSEMBLY

1. **Make it real. You have promised Londoners a Violence Reduction Unit. It must be a tangible asset delivering sustained and considered action**

Much of your recent promotion of the VRU talks of bringing together the Met, public services and experts in other fields “to address the root causes of crime issues like poverty, social exclusion, mental health and lack of opportunity.”²³ You have also said that initiatives like the Young Londoners Fund and the funding of youth workers in major trauma centres form part of this model for violence prevention.²⁴

While these are all crucial elements of any model for violence prevention, you will need to demonstrate that the VRU brings something different to the table. It cannot simply be a re-branding exercise of existing programmes and policies.

The VRU needs to combine the enforcement activity of the Violent Crime Taskforce with wider prevention, to achieve both short and long-term results. It will need to have the confidence and the political and public support to do things differently: as highlighted by the Youth Violence Commission, the kind of public health approach you want the VRU to deliver will require “fundamental change in organisational, financial and cultural structures and traditions.”²⁵

Nor can be it something that is invisible. At the debate we held in City Hall on 20 September 2018 one guest remarked that “we have been talking for years” about how to stop violence and many questioned what the result of those discussions over many years has been.²⁶ Londoners need to see practical action being taken. We recommend that the VRU is set up as a dedicated team with specific objectives and deliverables. This will go some way to meeting the expectations of Londoners and will mirror the commendable work being undertaken in places like Glasgow and Birmingham. We expect to see this option included in the operating model options that will be discussed at your partnership reference group in January 2019.

Delivering a sustained, considered and coherent focus on violence is a large-scale and ambitious undertaking – and one that requires significant funding. The current funds being invested in the VRU, coming from surplus business rate revenues, are far from sufficient to resource the unit over the long term.²⁷ One of the key lessons from Scotland is that there needs to be a long-term commitment to this approach, both politically and financially. As such, we ask that you report back to the committee on how you plan to fund the VRU to ensure it is fit for purpose over many years, including how you intend to secure financial support from other partners, such as public health bodies.

2. **Be clear about the focus. The Violence Reduction Unit must tackle all forms of violence**
It is clear from our work that violence needs to be tackled in the round. Violence is violence whether it is committed with a gun, a knife, a broken bottle or a fist; and either by an adult or a young person.

²³ See <https://twitter.com/MayorofLondon/status/1051727090545029121>

²⁴ See <https://twitter.com/MayorofLondon/status/1056910875481858048>

²⁵ Youth Violence Commission, [Interim report](#), July 2018

²⁶ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 20 September 2018

²⁷ Mayoral decision, [MD2376 - Mobilisation costs for Violence Reduction Unit](#), 16 October 2018

We heard that a person's own experience of violence—this can be any type of violence—can influence their future likelihood of being a victim or perpetrator of violence themselves. We also heard about violence being a repeated pattern across generations: people follow the identity and actions of their family and the people around them as they grow up.

We are aware that in many of our discussions, and the discussions we have seen take place between MOPAC and other partners, much of the focus has been on young people, particularly in terms of knife crime and gangs. This is most apparent in the latest papers of the VRU steering group, which are heavily focused on serious youth violence.²⁸ This is to some extent understandable given the media focus on young people and the rise in issues such as 'county lines', which is considered a major factor in the rise in violence.

But we know that the problem is much greater than that. Half of the murders in the capital this year have been of those over the age of 25, as have half of the victims of knife crime with injury.²⁹ And the available evidence indicates that gangs are not as closely linked to violence as perhaps first thought: we heard that in the past two years the percentage of "definitively gang-related stabbings" has reduced.³⁰

We also know about the impact of domestic violence in the home on people's experiences and future choices, and how violence can start at home but then spread onto the streets.³¹ Domestic violence offences are on the rise, with 21 of the homicides that have occurred this year (to October) a result of domestic violence - far more than last year and already at 2016 levels. The number of domestic abuse violence with injury offences far surpasses the number of knife crime injuries.³²

Breaking the cycle of violence will mean focusing on all violence across all ages and working with communities over the long-term. We are reassured to hear from the Deputy Mayor for Police and Crime (DMPC) that the VRU will look at all forms of violence, as this committee has been strongly calling for the need to do for many months now.³³ But we urge caution against slipping back into a focus on young people, knife crime and gangs. One way of achieving this at an early stage will be through MOPAC's review of homicides and serious cases. In establishing the scope for the homicide and serious case review, we expect to see **all types of violence included, including cases of domestic violence. Following on from that, we expect to see explicit evidence in the early work programme of the VRU that all types of violence are being addressed.**

²⁸ Meeting of the Violence Reduction Unit Partnership Reference Group, [26 November 2018](#)

²⁹ BBC News, [The names and faces of those killed in London](#), 16 April 2018.

³⁰ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, [24 May 2018](#). The committee's previous work has highlighted the weakening link between violence and gang activity. In 2016, the committee reported gang activity makes up only a small proportion of serious youth violence. The Met's data at the time showed that a gang element was identified in a relatively small amount of serious youth violence: just under five per cent in 2015-16. The committee's 2017 report on gun crime found that where lethal guns are fired, gangs are known to be involved in about half of incidents. For other types of gun crime, the link to gangs is even lower.

³¹ Police and Crime Committee round table meeting, 24 July 2018

³² Metropolitan Police website, [Hate Crime and Special Crime Dashboard](#)

³³ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 4 October 2018

3. Keep it local. A pan-London commitment to a model for violence prevention is needed – but delivery at that level will be hard

It is crucial to remember that a lot of what we would call a ‘public health approach’ is going on at a local level in some boroughs already. This includes, for example, the models for violence prevention being implemented in places like Lambeth and Lewisham and, at a grassroots level, the work done by organisations like Father2Father, the Rugby Portobello Trust and across borough Street Base teams.

The involvement of people and organisations like this, who know what works for their community, will be critical to the development of the VRU. We were impressed by the work undertaken in Birmingham to develop solutions from the ground up, through its commission on youth violence and by working with those at a local level who have a “currency of trust” with people and organisations in a community.³⁴ We heard from one London borough that:

“if you are trying to change a community, the community has to want to change and the community has to lead the change. That can only be done if the community is not just consulted on what we are doing but part of developing it. That is a really important step.”³⁵

You have said that the VRU will look to ‘scale up’ the model in Glasgow.³⁶ But we know that pan-London level delivery of services in this area is unlikely to work. The success of the Glasgow approach is based on a detailed local knowledge of communities, families and individuals. This allows for targeted interventions with vulnerable groups and individuals with multiple agencies playing their part but following a common and agreed script.

At the first meeting of your VRU Partnership Reference Group you discussed ways to integrate the community voice into the VRU.³⁷ However, there is no single London community. The VRU needs to be set up in such a way that it delivers a genuinely local approach, involving communities on the ground – while creating a way for all to work with the same shared aims and overarching guidelines.

4. Deliver best practice. The Violence Reduction Unit needs to demonstrate independence, transparency and openness, and build trust.

The VRU Partnership Reference Group has discussed its principles for involving communities in the VRU, including consistent and transparent communication; speaking people’s language, and ‘closing the loop’ with follow up and action taken on all engagement.³⁸

We have previously expressed concern about MOPAC’s ability to deliver on issues such as these and are concerned that its reputation in tackling these issues is not strong. On

³⁴ Police and Crime Committee visit to the office of the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, 7 September 2018

³⁵ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 20 September 2018

³⁶ Mayor of London, [Mayor launches new public health approach to tackling serious violence](#), 19 September 2018

³⁷ Violence Reduction Unit Partnership Reference Group, [Violence Reduction Unit – Integrating Community Voice](#), 29 October 2018

³⁸ Violence Reduction Unit Partnership Reference Group, [Violence Reduction Unit – Integrating Community Voice](#), 29 October 2018

transparency, for example, we have criticised MOPAC for the level of information it makes publicly available: and when it does publish information, we have concerns about the speed with which it is made available. On following up and taking action, MOPAC has accepted that it does not do this well enough; for example on issues raised during its Justice and Policing Matters meetings, the public rarely see how the actions from these meetings are taken forward and what the outcomes of those meetings are.³⁹

We heard from the DMPC that “the VRU will sit within MOPAC initially and will be built up from within MOPAC.”⁴⁰ We note in the evidence we gathered that, elsewhere, different arrangements for similar units are in place. The VRU in Scotland is based within Police Scotland, but operates at arm’s length and is, in practice, independent of policing. The West Midlands Violence Prevention Alliance sits firmly within the public health arena, receiving grant funding from the Police and Crime Commissioner for its activity.

Placing the VRU within MOPAC may be the preferred option, but we, as well as Londoners, need to have the confidence that it can deliver on the principles set out by the Partnership Reference Group. **If the VRU is placed within MOPAC, we will be looking closely to see whether it can demonstrate its independence from policing; whether it is meeting its principles around openness and transparency; and whether Londoners have trust in it to deliver. If we are not persuaded that the principles are being met within a year of the VRU being in operation, we will review whether MOPAC is the most appropriate place for it to be based.**

Next steps: taking the new model forward

We do not underestimate the challenge of changing the mindset not only of those who are at risk of being involved in violence, but of the organisations responsible for preventing it. We hope that the recommendations and principles we have set out are ones you are prepared to adopt to help to shape the vision, strategy and operating model of London’s new model for violence prevention going forward.

Londoners need to see a clearly set out action plan for the VRU and for your future efforts to tackle violence. It is important to all involved in tackling this problem they can see the effect of this new model for violence prevention over time, as opposed to current methods of tackling violence. By the end of January 2019, we need to see an action plan and measurables that are as open and transparent as possible, so that the public can also measure its success.

We look forward to receiving your response on how you plan to meet each of our recommendations and guiding principles on how to make the VRU work for London, and ultimately reduce the unacceptable level of violence in the capital.

We would be very grateful to receive your response by 31 January 2019. Please copy your response to Becky Short, Scrutiny Manager, becky.short@london.gov.uk.

³⁹ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 11 January 2018

⁴⁰ Meeting of the Police and Crime Committee, 4 October 2018

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve O'Connell', written in a cursive style.

Steve O'Connell AM
Chairman of the Police and Crime Committee

cc. Sophie Linden, Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, MOPAC
Cressida Dick CBE QPM, Commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis

