

Information sharing:

Benefits and challenges in tackling gang and youth violence

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Introduction

This report explores the role of information sharing in supporting Government policy and initiatives to tackle gang and youth violence. It sets out common information sharing issues and barriers faced by local areas across the country. It also looks at current and future challenges facing the multi-agency approach that is supported by the the Home Office-led Ending Gang and Youth Violence (EGYV) programme.

The findings detailed in this report have been informed using learning and insights drawn directly from a range of local areas across the country that are supported by the EGYV programme, as well as from a review by us, of the Government's Ending Gang and Youth Violence programme annual reports.

References to experiences of local areas have been gathered through meetings and discussions, as well as a workshop hosted in partnership with the Home Office. The workshop took place in January 2015 and offered a space in which representatives from a range of partnerships came together to share their own experiences, swap good practice and explore common information sharing themes with one another, and with Government departments.

The report is aimed at professionals who are directly involved in gangs and youth violence work, or those who have an interest in the safeguarding of vulnerable people more generally. It is also aimed at those leading on potentially overlapping initiatives, such as the Troubled Families programme and youth employability.

Following a brief overview of both national policy and local approaches, the report looks at the types of information sharing being used to support multi agency work to tackle gangs and youth violence. The barriers to information sharing that have been identified through our work are also set out, together with an exploration of the changes unfolding - across the wider public sector and in the way gangs operate - and the impact this is having on information sharing.

Through our work, we have seen that a single, exemplar approach won't work in tackling gang and youth violence; multi-agency arrangements must reflect local needs and conditions. Therefore, rather than provide a prescriptive 'how to' guide, this report is intended to support agencies in identifying the benefits of sharing information, the potential barriers they need to consider when developing partnerships, and the challenges they will need to address in order to ensure their approach is sustainable.



Working together - national policy

The riots across England in 2011 placed gang and youth violence firmly in the headlines and resolutions to these issues remain high priority for both central government and local places.

A partnership approach has been at the heart of tackling gang and youth violence, with the Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions and other departments setting this out in a cross-government report in response to the riots¹.

The Ending Gang and Youth Violence (EGYV) programme, which emerged as a commitment from the joint report, is now providing support to 43 local areas across the country. Many of these local areas have been creating local, multi-agency partnerships through which they can combine resources and share information to tackle the causes of gang and youth violence, and to prevent crime.



¹ Ending Gang and Youth Violence: a Cross-Government Report, 2011 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97861/gang-violence-summary.pdf

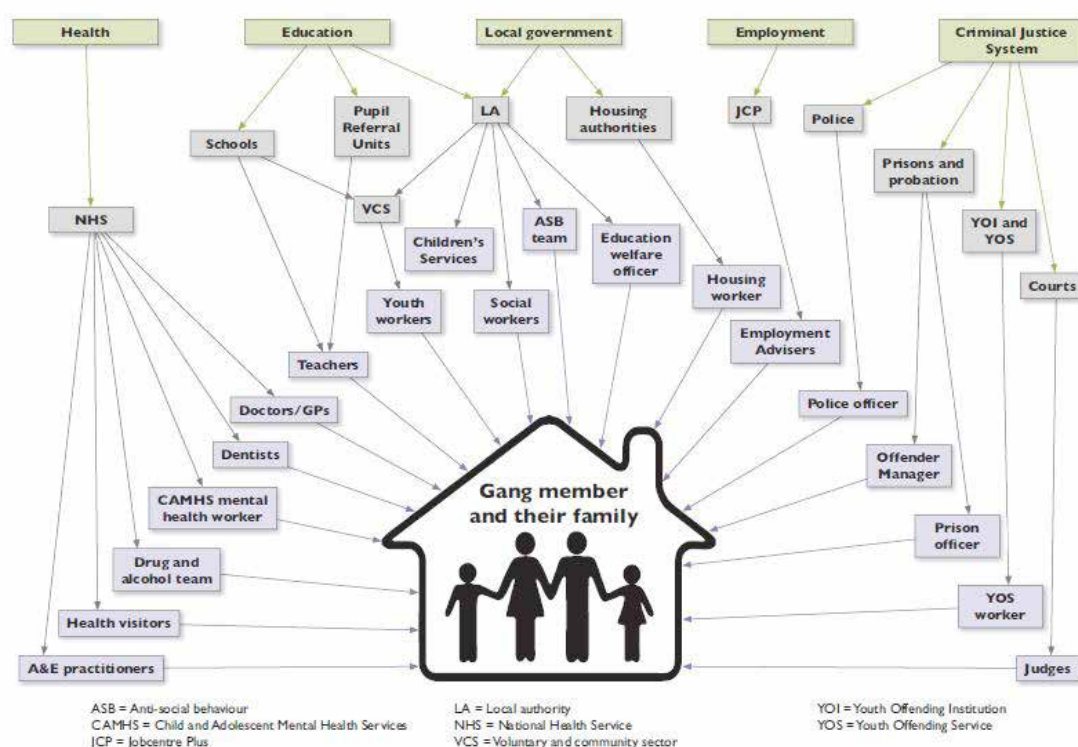
Working together – local partnerships

Across the five key themes set out in the 2011 EGYV report – prevention, pathways out, punishment, partnership working and providing support – local partnerships are working together to tackle youth violence and commission activities that divert and prevent young people from becoming engaged in gang culture.

To ensure a truly holistic approach to this, the partnerships bring together key organisations, including police, probation and social services with other mainstream agencies such as GPs, teachers, youth workers and job centre staff, as these people often have high levels of contact with the young people concerned.

Joint working is also used by partnerships to provide the right support to families of gang members. This is because supported families can in turn support young people who are involved in, or at risk from, gang and youth violence.

Figure 1 Map of local agencies in contact with a typical gang member's family



Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross Government Report 2011

To ensure that the organisations and agencies working across local partnerships operate effectively, they share information, develop shared risk assessments and an understanding of thresholds, and agree joint case management arrangements as well as referral routes to provide targeted support for young people. These steps ensure shared accountability for outcomes and help to track the progress of the partnership or multi-agency approach.

The significance of information sharing across these partnerships makes tackling gang and youth violence an area of interest for the Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing.

We have been working with local places to understand the barriers that prevent effective information sharing and are supporting them in identifying practical solutions to overcome these obstacles.

How information sharing can help tackle gang and youth violence

Information sharing between agencies, voluntary or community sector organisations and individuals, can play a role in tackling gang and youth violence in a number of ways. These include supporting the following approaches:

Comprehensive risk assessments

Information shared by a range of partners on risk factors such as truancy levels, arrests or cautions, poor living conditions, mental health needs and substance misuse, is key to effective multi-agency activity, both to:

- ▶ Identify and target geographical hotspots within communities, around which neighbourhood level action plans can then be developed; and
- ▶ Inform the development of shared initiatives that provide wrap-around support, coordinated disruption and/or diversionary activity, targeting individuals who may be involved, or at risk of involvement in, gang and youth violence.

Joint approach to case management

Sharing information between agencies about a specific individual or family in need or at risk, enables a holistic approach to the development and delivery of support to the people involved. This approach can also help partners to identify and tackle root causes, rather than just symptoms. Multi-agency case management discussions can also provide wider family context to discussions about individuals and support the alignment or integration of responses with local family intervention programmes i.e. Troubled Families.

Partnership approaches to resource and commissioning

Bringing together and sharing information on potential future risk ensures that local partnerships can predict future needs and demands linked to gang and youth violence more effectively. This in turn can help partnerships work together to ensure they allocate resources and commission services appropriately.

Profiling of victims and perpetrators

Sharing intelligence between partners, communities and key stakeholders, is required to build comprehensive profiles of suspected and known victims and perpetrators. This information can also be used to build up profiles for key groups of people, mapping the links within and between gangs, both in a specific area and across the region or country.

Sharing intelligence across a wider partnership

Sharing of information between local partnerships (focused on tackling gangs and youth violence) and wider groups can also help to identify links with other overlapping priority crime categories e.g. organised crime, domestic abuse, violence against women and girls (VAWG), child sexual exploitation (CSE), and help facilitate earlier intervention.

In addition to these areas of activity where information sharing forms a key part of a multi-agency approach, the following specific strands around the advantages of information sharing have been highlighted by Government in its EGYV reports:

- ▶ Improved identification and sharing of information about mental health and substance misuse problems at the point of arrest, through targeting of the national youth justice and diversion schemes for young offenders.
- ▶ Promoting better links between hospital accident and emergency (A&E) departments and children's social care, to identify and support young people presenting at A&E who may be affected by gang activity.
- ▶ Placing youth workers in A&E departments to pick up and refer young people at risk of serious violence.



Information sharing issues faced by local partnerships

The benefits of sharing information are widely acknowledged by local partnerships tackling gang and youth violence and there is generally a desire to share data between agencies. However, as reported in the Ending Gang and Youth Violence: Annual Report 2013, there are barriers to information sharing and requests have been expressed for further support and guidance on issues including:

- ▶ Effective referral pathways for gang members;
- ▶ Clarity as to what information about vulnerable individuals and offenders can or cannot be legally and appropriately shared between partners; and
- ▶ Communication to key partners about the needs and benefits of sharing.

As part of our work to identify some of the information sharing issues affecting local areas that are tackling gang and youth violence, we brought a number of local places together, including Waltham Forest, Nottingham and Margate, to discuss the challenges they faced.

Our one-day workshop ran in partnership with the Home Office Gang and Youth Violence team and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF). It was attended by thirty professionals from a range of agencies, including the police, Jobcentre Plus, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), councils, voluntary sector organisations and youth service providers.

Key information sharing issues facing local partnerships

Following an analysis of the problems, barriers, needs and concerns that were raised at the event, four key information sharing issues were identified by the representatives that attended:

1. Effective management and assessment of risk
2. Improving links with, and engaging the health sector
3. Understanding and fear of information sharing
4. Willingness and timing

More detail about each of these categories is covered in the next section.

1. Effective management and assessment of risk

To ensure the effective development and safe delivery of activity in tackling gang and youth violence, local partnerships recognise the importance of well-informed risk assessments and risk management plans.

These plans need to be formed using a broad range of information and can be used to identify geographical clusters of risk (or 'hot spots') within a local place, to create risk profiles for the area around key buildings e.g. care homes, or to assess the risks associated with the placement of vulnerable children or adults, such as children in care, or adults released from custody.

A number of local areas expressed concerns that risk assessments are over-reliant on police data. Concerns have also been raised regarding the different ways that gang and youth violence data is recorded across the country, making it more difficult to determine accurate assessments of risk across administrative boundaries.

In addition to a broad range of information sources, some partnerships would like to use both factual and anecdotal information as part of risk assessments and plans. Making use of anecdotal evidence, e.g. concerns raised by a potential witness or neighbour, as part of the risk management process would require local partnerships to have a high level of trust and confidence in each other and in the quality of the information and intelligence provided by one another. It would also require mutual agreement as to how different forms of information would be used and weighted in the risk assessment processes.

Sharing information to inform joint risk assessment and joint response plans can become complicated by the use of differing thresholds and responses to 'high risk' by partners. Different organisational cultures and volumes of work for the agencies involved will inevitably impact on what is considered to be 'high risk' and response times. If these differences are not understood by all partners, it can impact on the flow of information between agencies when contributing to risk assessment and planning. A

lack of understanding regarding the likely timeframe for a response to a high risk situation, may also undermine relationships between partners and reduce their willingness to request or provide information in future.

Agencies working with self-referred individuals can face problems assessing risk adequately if the individual doesn't provide a full picture of information about themselves during the referral process. With situations where issues may be sensitive e.g. mental health, substance misuse or involvement in illegal activity, it is essential that service providers feel able to draw on information held by partner agencies to ensure potential risks to staff and clients are fully understood and managed. Concerns which might be raised by frontline staff regarding consent and the likelihood of gaining consent from the individual if it is needed, and how to deal with their possible refusal to consent, have to be managed and addressed as part of the organisation's and the partnership's information sharing processes.

The impact of gang and youth violence goes beyond individuals and their families, to impact on the locality and communities in which they are living or spending time. Strong links with organised crime means that coordinated gang activity is often taking place across multiple geographic locations. In addition, the quality of a local environment and the prevalence of vulnerable people in an area can have a significant impact on risk. Although these issues are generally understood, there is concern that they are not yet reflected in risk assessment and management processes, and that there is currently a lack of thought given to geographic factors when assessing risk.

2. Improving links with, and engaging the health sector

There is widespread acknowledgement that links between local partnerships tackling gang and youth violence, and health service providers need to be improved in order to support information sharing and effective joint working. However, cultural differences, rapidly changing structures and an increase in the variety of service providers within the health sector can make engagement particularly difficult.

An area of particular concern is the under-reporting of knife injuries, leading local partnerships to seek an expansion beyond the current commitment for information sharing by A&E departments².

Representatives from local partnerships at our workshop expressed a desire to capture reported knife injuries from a wider range of health care providers, such as GPs, walk-in centres, and minor injuries units. With the exception of data from GPs, the feasibility of sharing this kind of expanded data set is currently being looked at by the Centre for Public Health at Liverpool John Moores University as part of a three year research project funded by the Department of Health. Aiming to identify and support the optimum use of NHS data in local violence prevention, the final report is due to be published in summer 2015. However, intermediate publications (produced in 2014) already provide a wealth of case studies, analysis and practical guides to developing health data sharing arrangements which existing partnerships could gain from.

Local partnerships are also keen to look at expanding beyond sharing information about reported knife and gun injuries with A&E departments, to include injuries which could indicate cases of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and child sexual exploitation (CSE). This would also support local and national multi-

agency approaches in tackling these overlapping national priorities.

The vulnerability of young people involved in gang and youth violence is also at the heart of a desire to see earlier sharing of health information³ when young people are placed into local care homes and youth offending programmes.

When health records are shared with services in advance of a placement, the support needs and risks of the vulnerable young person, to themselves, the community and the staff, can be assessed before their arrival. Referrals to services can then be made early enough to enable support to be in place from the moment they arrive.

The mental health needs of young people involved in, or at risk from, gang and youth violence, is also an area of real concern for local places. A clear 'ask' which came from our workshop discussions, was the need for improved engagement of, and information sharing with, mental health services. If local partners want to fully understand the mental health needs of gang members and victims, collaboration with mental health practitioners will be required to identify what information should be shared, both to identify needs and to plan or commission joint activity accordingly.⁴

² The 2010 Coalition 'programme for government' included a pledge to "make hospitals share non-confidential information with the police so they know where gun and knife crime is happening and can target stop-and-search in gun and knife crime hotspots". This commitment has led to the development of a national information standard for 'Information Sharing to Tackle Violence' by A&E departments. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.isb.nhs.uk/documents/isb-1594/amd-31-2012/index.html>

³ Health information here refers to a wide range of health care needs, including mental health, sexual health, substance misuse/addiction etc.

⁴ Public Health England (PHE) briefing document, supported by Home Office, and produced as part of the Ending Gang and Youth Violence programme, 'The mental health needs of gang affiliated young people' provides information on understanding mental health needs, identifying risk and appropriate interventions for gang affiliated young people. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398674/The_mental_health_needs_of_gang-affiliated_young_people_v3_23_01_1.pdf

3. Understanding and fear of information sharing

The value of developing an information sharing agreement to support local partnerships tackling gang and youth violence goes beyond the resulting data shared or the outcomes this data supports. Key benefits also emerge through the meetings and conversations which take place. These can develop a deeper understanding of one another's organisational cultures, attitudes to risk, and client groups. The process of developing an information sharing agreement can also establish strong relationships between individuals, and help to identify who the right people are to involve.

These conversations are particularly important in helping partners understand the value and impact that information held by other agencies can have. This makes it critical for partners to take time to understand what information they each need, who within each organisation needs it, how they will use it, and how sharing it can help to tackle gang and youth violence.

Fear of poor quality data can also be a powerful barrier to sharing information. Some organisations may have concerns about being exposed for their poor data quality as a result of sharing information and others may be apprehensive that the poor quality of a partner's data will limit the effectiveness of a joint risk assessment. With this in mind, before detailed discussions about information sharing take place within partnerships, some organisations may need additional support to help them identify and acknowledge limitations within their own data, and to take steps to improve it.

Joint working and training between agencies involved in gang and youth violence work should be encouraged to help manage expectations of each partner's role. This will help partners to understand one another's capacity to act on and respond to the information shared, ensuring a mutual understanding of what different organisations will do and when, for example, in response to concerns shared about risk to an individual.

As well as a shared understanding *between* different organisations, successful information sharing also requires a shared understanding and commitment to information sharing *within* organisations. To ensure a consistent approach across the organisational

structure, local places benefited from taking time and effort to engage with staff to ensure they understand:

- ▶ The legal basis for the information sharing they do;
- ▶ Decision making processes they should use to handle information sharing requests; and
- ▶ The benefits to their organisation, their clients and their partners of sharing information.

Senior management and leadership teams within each partner organisation also benefited from championing information sharing arrangements with their organisations. However, support should be provided, not only to frontline staff making day to day information sharing decisions, but also to middle managers who are responsible for them.

Lack of communication around strategic information sharing agreements and approved processes can lead to low levels of awareness of approved methods for sharing and result in high levels of fear about the consequences of 'getting it wrong' i.e. fines, disciplinary action, criminal convictions, which create barriers to information sharing.

Recognising and valuing the potentially difficult decisions staff may have to make about sharing information can also help tackle fear and encourage understanding. Opportunities for this include acknowledging, recording and taking account of staff information sharing responsibilities and development needs within each organisation's appraisal, staff development and performance management frameworks.

4. Willingness and timing

Among the partner organisations we have engaged with, there is an overwhelming willingness to influence and drive change that will improve information sharing and partnership working between, and within, statutory and non-statutory organisations.

This appetite encompasses the development of local solutions, and uses knowledge from experiences on the ground to influence national policy development and guidance around information sharing.

We have seen a clear desire for national guidance around information sharing to go beyond offering direction on what places should and can do, to include what local places *must* do. This would include altering the approach from having to justify why information was being shared between partners, to explaining why information isn't already being shared.

However, there is also recognition that a simple willingness to share information isn't enough; there needs to be a willingness to look at changing the way individual organisations record data to make sharing and cross referencing data possible.

For example, this might include aligning procedures so that all partners record dates and addresses using the same format and terminology i.e. 'DoB' versus 'birth date'. Or this may include all partners using common data fields that can be used to match an individual's records across a number of different sources.

Timing around sharing information can also be a concern for local places. When information sharing requests are only made in response to a crisis, it limits the opportunities for the development of effective relationships and processes between partners. For example, when organisations delay sharing information until a sufficient element of risk is present to provide a clear legal justification, their approach hinders the development of more proactive information sharing arrangements with other organisations that are seeking early intervention and a move away from crisis management.

Senior managers' attitudes to risk have the potential to play a crucial role here, both in terms of the risk thresholds for responding to individual clients, and risks to their organisation in sharing or not sharing information. They can often set the tone of an organisation's approach to risk generally, as well as its regard to information sharing as a potential risk.

Challenges and opportunities

It is widely acknowledged that the ways in which gangs operate are changing. These changes pose new challenges that will impact on the actions that local partnerships tackling gang and youth violence need to take, both to prevent and divert young people from getting involved in gang and youth violence, and to deliver the information sharing needed to support these measures.

Key challenges identified in the Government Ending Gang and Youth Violence Programme: Annual Report 2014/15 include:

- ▶ Street gangs becoming less visible in public and more fluid in the way they organise themselves;
- ▶ A hard core of gang members becoming more organised and sophisticated in their criminality, and exploiting vulnerable young people and adults in order to sell drugs; and
- ▶ Ensuring focus on the underlying causes of gang violence to ensure continued early intervention (by safeguarding, health and education agencies) with children and young people at risk.

Sharing information will be crucial in tackling these new challenges. Specific issues relating to these changes and the information sharing aspects of them, are explored in more detail on the following pages.



Reduced visibility giving rise to ‘cuckooing’

‘Cuckooing’ is a tactic where gangs take over the home of a vulnerable adult and use it as a base for dealing drugs. An increase in this activity is one impact of a shift to less visible ways of working by gangs.

Victims of cuckooing may be vulnerable due to mental health issues, learning disabilities, isolation, substance misuse or a combination of problems, but may have no existing connections with gangs or criminal activity. Therefore, local places that are looking to address this growing problem may need to develop a wider partnership and engage with agencies that are focused on supporting vulnerable adults, rather than young people, which has been the traditional focus for tackling gang activity.

Bringing together new agencies in this way provides opportunities to share information that could help identify potential and actual victims of cuckooing. This could help develop coordinated support plans and influence joint commissioning as well as the development and delivery of services. These opportunities for sharing information will introduce new challenges as each joining partner looks to build an understanding of the other’s remit, culture and systems, and explores ways to move towards shared goals.

When services that are focused on supporting vulnerable adults begin to work together with agencies that target vulnerable children, new issues will arise around the use of different ‘shared’ information systems, as well as around gaining the consent of vulnerable adult service users to share information.

Other new challenges will arise when developing links between adult mental health professionals, substance misuse support service providers (often charities) and the criminal justice system. This is not least as a result of diverse professional cultures and attitudes towards information sharing, but also due to the impact of public service transformation on capacity, different approaches to referral, risk assessment and thresholds.

County lines – cross border crime and exploitation

The growing link between gangs and organised crime is generating an increase in the exploitation of vulnerable young people and adults to move and sell drugs across the country along ‘county drug lines’. The cross-border nature of this tactic means that agencies not only need to work together and share information within a local place, but also across different administrative boundaries, including council, police, health authority area etc.

Sharing information across administrative boundaries brings additional challenges. While some services, such as police authorities, may have shared access to information through a national database, as well as a common set of procedures for risk assessment and similar attitudes to sharing information, this is unlikely to be the case for other neighbouring organisations, including councils, health trusts and local probation services.

The movement of people and the transience of gang members within a local area, also highlights the necessity of being able to share up to date information in real time. However, this can only take place if agencies have the relationships and tools needed to develop a sustainable and systematic approach to keeping ‘their information’ updated, and to knowing who the right people are to share the information with, and when.⁵

⁵ For further information see the National Crime Agency’s (NCA) Intelligence Assessment; County Lines, Gangs and Safeguarding at <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/620-nca-intelligence-assessment-county-lines-gangs-and-safeguarding/file>

Early intervention – reaching out to peripheral partners

As local partnerships look to focus more closely on early intervention in order to divert young people away from involvement in gangs and violence, they need to reach out and engage with a wider range of partners, such as schools, health visitors and school nurses.

However, feedback to us from local places has indicated that these relationships are becoming harder to maintain with the loss of key links between police, councils and schools, due to factors including restructuring and drives for efficiency savings. For example, the loss of school liaison in many police forces was cited as one attribute that has made building and maintaining relationships more difficult. It hasn't however, lessened the need for sharing information between key agencies.

A number of risk factors, which can be used to help identify vulnerable young people at risk from gang and youth violence, link directly to data that is either already collected by schools and other education partners or which could be monitored by them. This includes:

- ▶ Poor attendance levels, truancy and exclusion;
- ▶ Low levels of educational achievement;
- ▶ Fear for their personal safety within a school environment;
- ▶ Lack of connectivity with / attachment to the school community; and
- ▶ Bullying or being bullied.

Sharing this type of information with local partners, such as police and children's services, can not only help identify vulnerable young people but also provide a platform on which a coordinated, multi-agency approach to supporting individuals can be developed.

The importance of developing relationships and pathways for schools to share information on children that are perceived to be at risk of involvement in gangs, goes beyond this individual policy context. Risk factors⁶ which increase the likelihood of a young person becoming involved in gang or youth violence are similar to the risk factors identified for involvement in other harmful activities, such as youth offending more generally, violent extremism and child sexual exploitation (CSE).

Relationships between schools and local partnerships tackling gangs and youth violence can also help with the early identification of behavioural indicators, often displayed by children involved with gangs, such as:

- ▶ Sudden loss of interest in school;
- ▶ The appearance of graffiti-style tags on their possessions;
- ▶ Changes in friendship groups.

⁶ Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) report [due to be published autumn 2015]: Preventing Gang and Youth Violence: A review of risk and protective factors

Additional information sharing challenges and opportunities

Our work with local places has helped us to identify the following, additional challenges and opportunities.

1. Restructuring of NHS and probation services – changes to the way in which health and offender rehabilitation services are delivered across the country, such as the creation of 21 new community rehabilitation companies (CRC), health and social care integration and the increase in private and voluntary sector NHS providers, may result in new challenges and opportunities for local partnerships looking to engage these services in their multi-agency approaches to tackling gang and youth violence.
2. The prioritisation of CSE as the ‘new national threat’⁷ – there are concerns over the increasing focus on CSE and the potential for this to result in the redirection of resources away from tackling gang and youth violence, despite the overlap between the two issues.

We will be exploring these additional challenges further as we continue our work with local areas.

⁷ New measures to tackle child sexual exploitation announced at a landmark Downing Street summit in March 2015 - www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-unveils-tough-new-measures-to-tackle-child-sexual-exploitation

Our role

Using the learning and insights explored in this report, we will continue with our work in identifying the benefits and barriers of information sharing in tackling gang and youth violence. We will specifically continue to work with local places and national partners, supporting them in uncovering further learning that will help them meet the future challenges of this multi-agency approach. We will do this by:

1. Working intensively with local areas to identify and shape information sharing approaches, including:
 - a. Capturing and disseminating existing good information sharing practice locally, and more widely through our extensive networks;
 - b. Highlighting specific information sharing issues to the local partnership; and
 - c. Identifying information sharing issues linked to the partnership's plans for any new activities to tackle gang and youth violence, and helping them to tackle these.
2. Continuing to develop relationships with local partnerships tackling gang and youth violence, identifying ongoing barriers to information sharing and capturing good practice and methods used to overcome them – then disseminating these for other places facing similar issues to learn from, and for Government to use in shaping future policy and legislation.
3. Continuing to build relationships with relevant national partners, including the DWP Social Justice team, MoJ Transforming Rehabilitation team, MOPAC, College of Policing, to develop a better understanding of current information sharing issues around tackling gang and youth violence and to share our findings regarding future challenges.

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