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EARLY INTERVENTION FOUNDATION

The role of primary schools in early intervention to prevent youth violence

Insights from work in two London boroughs

July 2020

Stephanie Waddell

Acknowledgments

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About EIF

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life.

EIF is a research charity, focused on promoting and enabling an evidence-based approach to early intervention. Our work focuses on the developmental issues that can arise during a child's life, from birth to the age of 18, including their physical, cognitive, behavioural and social and emotional development. As a result, our work covers a wide range of policy and service areas, including health, education, families and policing.

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Foreword

We completed this work and finalised this report before the Covid-19 outbreak and the introduction of social distancing, lockdown and school closures. We have made the decision to publish it now in its original form, because we hope it offers insights that remain relevant to policymakers, local service leaders or practitioners working with children and young people who are vulnerable to youth violence or gang involvement.

While youth violence may be less prominent in today's headlines, the issues this report considers have not gone away. The children and young people who were already vulnerable to gang involvement and youth violence are likely to be even more vulnerable as a result of school closures and dramatic reductions in youth service provision and other universal services. The professionals who would usually support vulnerable children and young people have been struggling to assess risk and spot the signs that things are going wrong without face-to-face contact, even where they have been able to offer support remotely.

Primary schools have a mountain to climb as they reopen and children start to return in greater numbers. It is likely that the true impact of some children's experiences over the lockdown period is impossible to predict right now, and will only become clear once they are back in school and in face-to-face contact with professionals. Primary schools will need to prioritise children's wellbeing, social and emotional development, relationships and creating nurturing school environments. These are the building blocks of children's re-engagement with learning, as well as their longer-term health and happiness. These are also the things that we know can build children's resilience to negative influences, and to involvement in youth crime, violence or antisocial behaviour.

Of course, primary schools are only one part of complex local systems. Our paper highlights several opportunities to nudge local systems in ways that may significantly improve the way they function and meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families, such as integrating schools more clearly into early help arrangements, or thinking creatively about engagement with the voluntary and community sector. Now more than ever, local authorities, voluntary and community sector organisations, health agencies and others need to be able pull together to support vulnerable children and young people and prevent youth violence.

Stephanie Waddell
EIF, June 2020

1. Introduction

The need for a whole-system, public health approach to preventing serious youth violence is well recognised. As well as putting a range of effective interventions in place, we also need to focus on tackling structural adversity through national action to tackle poverty, social inequality and the other societal issues that create the conditions for violence. Effective interventions to support individual children and families are a crucial part of a public health approach, but without concerted action to address these issues, the impact of work to respond to individual risk factors will be limited.

Effective and well-targeted early intervention has a role to play. It can reduce the risk that children will become involved in violence and can improve a range of short- and long-term outcomes for vulnerable children including their mental and physical health, educational attainment and employment prospects. EIF has made several contributions to the thinking on early intervention to address the risk of serious youth violence, including a rapid review of evidence-based interventions and work which shows that strongly associated risk factors can be identified in children as young as 7.[1] Taken together, these reports have helped to answer important questions about how and when we can identify children at risk of involvement in youth violence, and about the interventions we know can have a positive impact. However, ensuring that these interventions are available for the children who can benefit from them can be incredibly difficult within complex local systems.

Over the past three years, we have been supported by the Battersea Power Station Foundation to work with the London boroughs of Lambeth and Wandsworth to consider ways to apply this evidence, explore the way local systems support or undermine efforts to prevent violence, and to build capacity within local services. This paper offers a set of insights from this work which may be helpful for policymakers, local leaders and service managers, commissioners or practitioners.

1 Waddell, S. (2015) *Preventing gang and youth violence: Spotting signals of risk and supporting children and young people*. London: Early Intervention Foundation. Available at: **https://www.eif.org.uk/report/preventing-gang-and-youth-violence-spotting-signals-of-risk-and-supporting-children-and-young-people**

2. The role of primary schools

How well are primary schools able to support children at risk of youth violence?

As part of this work we took a closer look at the role of primary schools and how well they were able to identify the early signs of risk and to support those children. We explored the range of issues facing primary schools in Lambeth and Wandsworth in depth through qualitative research.[2] This starkly illustrated how systemic barriers were leading to opportunities for early intervention being missed.

Primary school heads and teachers in areas affected by gang activity were concerned about the risks facing their children.

For some schools, gang involvement or 'recruitment' was a very real and imminent risk. For others, it was an issue in the local area that impacted the school – whether through sibling involvement, involvement of ex-pupils, or children's exposure to gang culture in the community. There was deep, shared concern about a high level of social and emotional difficulties among pupils, and a perception that poor social and emotional skills increased children's vulnerability to gang and youth violence as well as a broader set of risks.

> *"They fall out with each other. They don't have a way to make it up so they'll shout over. Some things that you think are quite small can become a big issue and they don't have the skills to deal with things when they go wrong."*

Primary schools were not well integrated into wider early help systems.

Our qualitative research highlighted two problems. Firstly, even where the risk of gang involvement was recognised as a potential safeguarding issue by schools, referrals into children's services often resulted in no further action. Secondly, referral pathways for children who teachers knew would not meet the thresholds for support from statutory services (children's services or child and adolescent mental health services) were very opaque, and it was unclear to schools what services might be available or appropriate. Where these referrals did happen, they tended to rely on existing relationships between teachers and individuals in other services or voluntary and community sector organisations.

> *"We can be utterly worried about a child, really tearing our hair out worried … We finally get to the point where we can make the call to social services and we just get told 'not our thresholds' … I've got a case at the minute that I'm just going to keep taking higher and higher until somebody pays attention to me because I'm not happy."*

2 Waddell, S., & Jones, N. (2018) *Intervening early to prevent gang and youth violence: The role of primary schools*. London: Early Intervention Foundation. Available at: https://www.eif.org.uk/report/intervening-early-to-prevent-gang-and-youth-violence-the-role-of-primary-schools

In-school support varied considerably and was rarely, if ever, evaluated.

Some schools relied heavily on individual members of pastoral support staff to provide support to children identified as potentially vulnerable. Others had experimented with different approaches as a way of trying to get the best possible support within limited resources, bringing in a range of interventions delivered by the voluntary and community sector, or prioritising therapists and educational psychologists within their budgets. PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) was generally cited as the opportunity for 'preventative' work with the whole class.

Some of the schools we spoke to were implementing evidence-based programmes, notably the PATHS social and emotional learning programme in Wandsworth.[3] This had been driven by the local authority and clinical commissioning group, which had part-funded the programme in 13 primaries. Other heads had chosen external providers and interventions based on word of mouth or anecdotal evidence of effectiveness. None of these interventions appeared to be being evaluated, although monitoring data on PATHS was collected by schools as required by the provider.

The potential of social and emotional learning

We know that high-quality social and emotional learning in primary schools can impact on a range of outcomes associated with youth crime and violence. Programmes targeted at pupils who need extra support with their behaviour or mental health and incorporate an element of cognitive or behavioural therapy are the most effective. There is also good evidence that anti-bullying interventions can be effective in reducing bullying and victimisation, and this is associated with reductions in weapons carrying. These interventions are best delivered as part of a whole-school approach which considers activity at a school-wide level and at a universal, whole-class level, as well as this kind of targeted support for children with greater needs.

Despite this good evidence, we know that primary schools are not generally delivering these kinds of interventions. This is for a range of complex reasons, including an over-reliance on anecdotal evidence and word of mouth to identify programmes to bring into schools.

Insights for primary schools

Schools face many challenges in supporting vulnerable children. We consider the wider system challenges in more detail in section 3. Evidence suggests that implementing and prioritising high-quality social and emotional learning – at a universal and targeted level – is important for primary schools, and particularly those whose children face additional challenges. We would encourage schools to consider the evidence, and we would caution against making decisions about in-school provision based on word of mouth or anecdotal evidence of impact. Curriculum time, time out of the classroom for targeted work, and staff time are likely to be best spent on approaches which have been evaluated and shown to improve outcomes. Schools need to take care to select an evidence-based approach that is suitable to their needs and context, and to plan to ensure effective implementation. Our guidance on social and emotional learning offers practice and implementation recommendations based on the latest evidence.[4] The focus of this guidance is on whole-school and whole-class approaches, and so we recommend that schools also look at our Guidebook for additional information on effective targeted programmes.[5]

3 See: https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/programme/paths-elementary-curriculum

4 See: https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/improving-social-and-emotional-learning-in-primary-schools-guidance-report

5 For programmes focused on promoting social and emotional learning within schools, see: https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/search?sets%5B%5D=%25%22school-based-social-emotional-learning%22%25

Insights for national policymakers

The role of primary schools in preventing youth violence has not been a focus of national policymaking. The government's 2018 serious violence strategy included a commitment to build on police–school partnerships (an approach which has not been evaluated) and a promise that 'the Home Office will work with the DfE to explore what more can be done to support schools to respond to potential crime risks'. However, it is clear that more needs to be done to realise this ambition and to ensure join-up on this agenda at national policy level. Other organisations, including through the Mentally Healthy Schools portal have tried to fill the gap by providing advice and lesson plans for schools.[6]

Early intervention to prevent youth violence cannot be considered in isolation from broader support for children who are vulnerable for other reasons. This is considered in the next section. We think that, as part of the solution, schools need to be supported to deliver social and emotional learning interventions for pupils who need extra help, as part of whole-school approaches which also incorporate universal, classroom-based social and emotional learning. The evidence on social and emotional learning should be given due prominence within policy decisions, guidance or advice to schools on character education, relationships, health and sex education, or children and young people's mental health, as well as within any specific guidance to schools on reducing gang involvement or youth violence.

6 See: https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/resources/gangs-and-gang-involvement/?page=1

3. The wider system

Mapping the system

Our qualitative research highlighted the fact that primary schools were not well integrated into the broader system or always linked with wider available support. We wanted to understand how the system was currently geared around primary schools and the opportunities for system changes that would better support primary schools to fulfil their early help role.

To shed light on this question, we ran a process of system mapping, involving local authority staff from children's services and public health, the clinical commissioning group, police, head teachers and youth workers. This exercise produced a familiar spider's web of services and individuals with a potential role in supporting primary-aged children who may be vulnerable to gang and youth violence (see next page).

The system mapping exercise identified four key challenges:

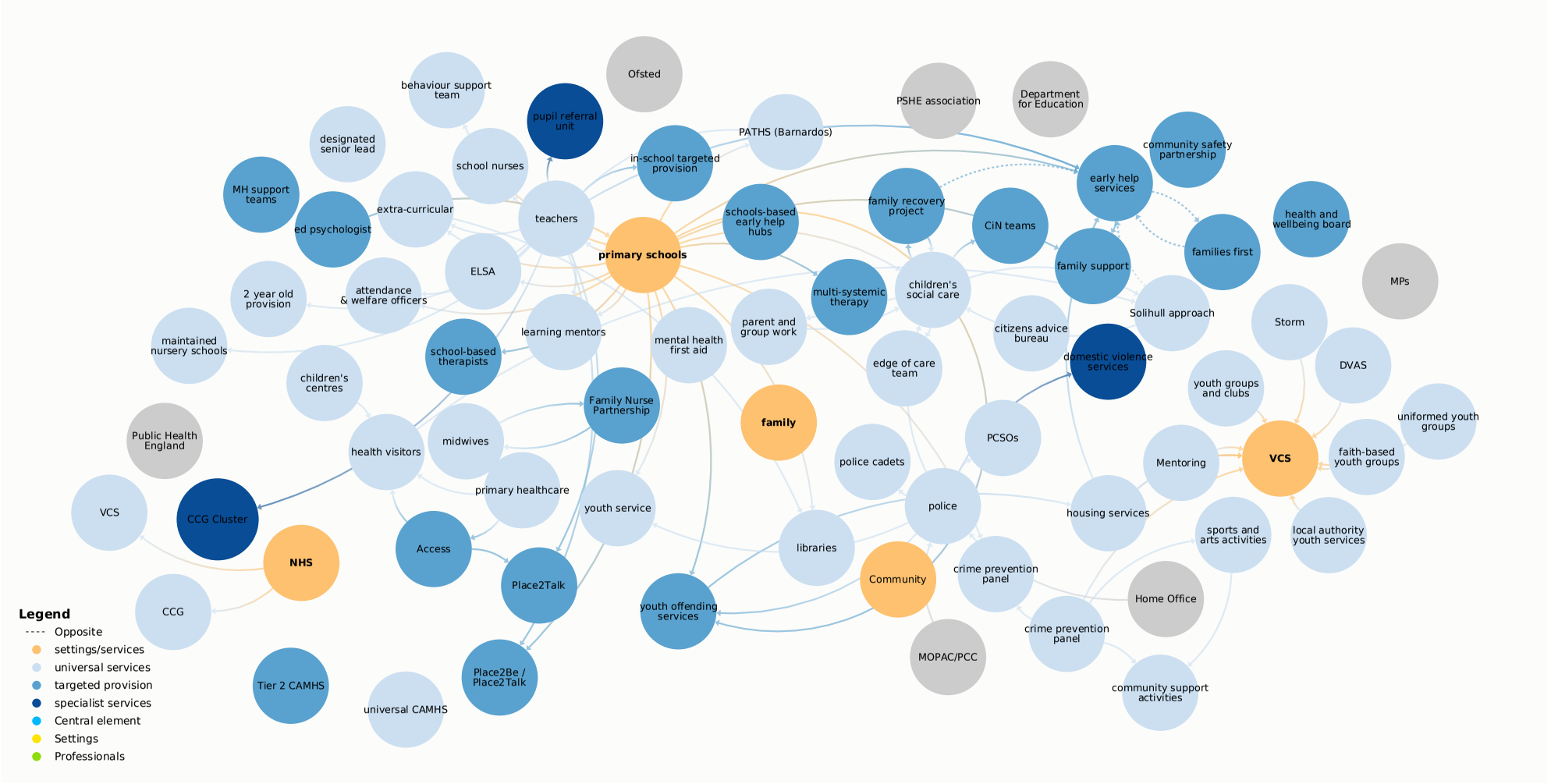
- Primary schools found it difficult to provide or access support for the children they were concerned about. They generally tried to solve problems themselves rather than try and refer into services that they knew were overstretched.
- Many primary schools had developed their own internal ecosystems of support for children. Interventions were generally brought into schools based on word-of-mouth recommendations. The nature and extent of in-school support varied considerably, and interventions and individual posts were vulnerable to budget cuts.
- Youth sector services were highly varied, and availability of youth sector provision did not necessarily relate to levels of local need. The local authority had a more direct relationship with the sector than in many local areas, including through the retention of an in-house youth service, and through direct funding relationships with some large, well-established youth centres, and was actively trying to influence the nature of support provided the youth sector and drive up the quality of the youth sector offer.
- Overall, the exercise showed a typically complex local system which had evolved over time and needed simplification. There was a lack of coherence, a lack of consistent standards or guiding principles for work with vulnerable children and young people, and no real sense of early help as a system-wide responsibility.

Redesigning the early help system in Wandsworth

At the time of our system mapping exercise, Wandsworth children's services were in the process of designing a new early help offer for families and children.[7] They aimed to simplify the system and to embed a whole-family approach across the workforce, and were ambitious about seeking to drive greater coherence across the whole system, including those organisations where they did not have any direct influence, such as those in the voluntary and community sector.

7 See: https://thrive.wandsworth.gov.uk/kb5/wandsworth/fsd/home.page. See also an EIF case study on THRIVE Wandsworth: https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/thrive-wandsworth

MAPPING THE SYSTEM AROUND PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ONE LOCAL AUTHORITY



Insights for local decision-makers

Work to prevent youth violence and gang involvement cannot be divorced from system-wide approaches to early help and support for vulnerable children and families. Children at risk of involvement in gangs or violence may not be known to children's social care. They may not be known to the police. But they are often extremely vulnerable. Schools and other universal services are critical to identifying risk and providing or brokering the provision of effective support, often from other agencies.

Directors of children's services and directors of public health have a crucial role to play in leading the local system of support for vulnerable children. There will be opportunities within the complexity of every local system to make small, incremental improvements and to drive greater coherence: for example by bringing primary school heads into regular multi-agency problem-solving discussions, ensuring that schools have a named early help contact, and nudging the voluntary and community sector towards better integration through thinking creatively about incentives and levers.

We must also consider the role of police and crime commissioners (PCCs), who have a critical role in coordinating local responses to prevent youth violence. PCCs can bring valuable leadership capacity, resource and coordination to the shared local endeavour to support vulnerable children. Their lead role within violence reduction units (VRUs) and their commissioning capacity creates an opportunity to increase the availability of evidence-based early interventions in a local area. This is best achieved by PCCs working with partners in children's services and the voluntary and community sector to consider the needs of children who are at risk locally and to identify effective support options which complement the existing service offer. We would urge PCCs and police forces to steer away from commissioning or delivering interventions which are planned in isolation from wider service planning for vulnerable children.

We cannot overemphasise the need for local responses to be informed by evidence and to be evaluated. Using evidence in designing services for children and young people is likely to lead to more effective services; evaluating services is crucial in order to understand whether services are delivering the impacts that are intended. There is still too much work going on with vulnerable children and young people with complex needs that has not been evaluated and does not draw on the existing evidence base about how to improve outcomes for this group, and so is unlikely to work.

Insights for national policymakers

Our work has highlighted the complexity and fragmentation of two local systems. This can be exacerbated or even caused by fragmentation of policymaking at national level. Clear national policy thinking and cross-government work to consider children's policy in the round in the context of the structural factors known to be linked to youth violence, such as poverty and socioeconomic inequality, is urgently needed.

Policy responsibilities relating to vulnerable children and families are currently spread across at least seven Whitehall departments, a division of roles which can, at times, lead to a lack of coherence, coordination of funding streams and convincing long-term strategy. Renewed effort to overcome this is essential.

In the meantime, the Home Office could do more to align policy to prevent youth crime and violence with wider children's policy across government, and should resist the temptation to create more new short-term funding streams targeted specifically at youth violence. We would also stress the importance of supporting local areas to use the available evidence in developing new services. This should include support for the work of the police and PCCs so that they are able to draw on the available evidence base in designing new interventions or ways of working.

4. Youth and community sector support

We also took a closer look at youth and community sector support in the two boroughs. We carried out a mapping exercise to give us a snapshot of the support available to primary school-aged children in the two boroughs beyond that offered by statutory services. This revealed two markedly different profiles. One borough had very little provision available to 5–11-year-olds despite having a healthy youth sector and well-established youth clubs. The other had a wide range of provision, with at least 90 youth groups offering support to primary-aged children. This borough was seeing a trend towards early intervention as a response to the many serious youth violence initiatives targeting older children, driven at least in part by direction-setting, funding and initiatives from the local authority children's services department.

Evaluating for impact

Unsurprisingly, youth sector support for children tended to be delivered by small, very local community groups. Very few if any of these had evaluated the impact of their work. As part of our work in the two boroughs, we ran workshops on developing science-based theories of change,[8] based on our 2019 guidance, *10 steps for evaluation success*.[9] The organisations who participated in the workshops shared a desire to improve their theories of change, or to develop them where they hadn't done already. However, they were all at the very earliest stages of their evaluation 'journey', and their capacity to engage with the what works evidence in this space was extremely limited. For some, this was because their work did not naturally fit into discrete programmes. Others found the sheer amount of available evidence impossible to navigate, had limited understanding of what could be considered to be evidence, or found identifying the assumptions behind their work challenging.

Insights for local decision-makers

The youth sector is a huge potential asset to those in local leadership roles grappling with the seemingly intractable problems of youth violence in a context of serious funding constraints. Our mapping in the two boroughs provided a sense of the range and diversity of youth sector provision. It also illustrated the fact that local leaders knew little about the quality and impact of this provision or whether it is reaching those young people who are most at risk. Local leaders face a significant challenge in trying to find ways to leverage some influence over youth and community sector organisations, in the absence of direct funding or commissioning relationships.

8 For a short video introduction to science-based theories of change, see: https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/developing-a-good-theory-of-change

9 Asmussen, K., Brims, L., & McBride, T. (2019) *10 steps for evaluation success*. London: Early Intervention Foundation. Available at: https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/10-steps-for-evaluation-success

Where there *are* direct funding or commissioning relationships, whether at local, police force or regional level, those responsible for designing services need reliable information to help make judgments about the quality and impact of local provision and inform the future development of services. It is imperative that funders and commissioners can critically appraise the theory of change on which an intervention rests, and that they prioritise and fund an appropriate level of evaluation. Our *10 steps for evaluation success* guidance offers more detailed advice.

Insights for national policymakers

We still know far less about what works in terms of youth sector support for children of this age. Many commonly used approaches such as youth work have yet to develop their evidence base. The government's 10-year investment in the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) is a major step forward in building our understanding of what works to prevent children and young people being drawn into crime or violence. The YEF has already commissioned evaluations for the 24 projects funded in its first funding round, the majority of which will be working with primary-aged children, and there will be more to follow. This is a sector that has not previously benefitted from sustained investment in evaluation, and the YEF provides a critical opportunity to test and learn about effective responses.[10]

Evidence needs to be at the heart of policymaking and decision-making in this space. Too much money has been spent and continues to be spent on intuitively attractive, short-term solutions to the problem, which have not been tested and are often simply unlikely to work.

10 For more on the Youth Endowment Fund, see: https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/

5. Conclusions

Early intervention is not a panacea. It is not an alternative to concerted action to address some of the structural factors that fuel violence. However, if it is delivered well, and targeted at the children and families who need it, the evidence is clear that it can have an impact. We know enough about the risk factors related to gang involvement or youth violence to be able to identify those children and families who would benefit from early intervention, and enough about what can work to ensure that the support they get stands the best possible chance of being effective.

Schools are essential actors within a system that facilitates effective early intervention, and they need to be recognised as such and supported to fulfil their role. Our work in these two boroughs has shown how local system dynamics can undermine this. It has underlined the crucial importance of a whole-system view on this issue, both at local and national level. No single local agency or government department can end youth violence. We urgently need to move beyond the rhetoric of the 'public health approach' and into its implementation, not blinded by complexity but willing to grasp the nettle in order to build a more sophisticated response with evidence at its heart.