

Lives Can Be Changed For Good

Sir Peter Bottomley MP

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During a past Covid year, I was in Worthing with representatives from various denominations and free churches for the National Prayer Breakfast. This Tuesday, in the Great Hall of Westminster, nearly 700 came together to consider the topic 'Serving the Common Good'.

Revd Les Isaac OBE was the keynote speaker. Coming to the UK from Antigua, he experienced gangs and street violence in his teens. After time as a Rastafarian in his search for hope, his life changing experience of becoming Christian inspired him to engage with the hard-to-reach communities he had known.

Councillor Noel Atkins is respected locally for his range of public service. I cooperated with him when he was central to the Heene Community Centre. One of his projects was the Street Pastors, helping and protecting younger people vulnerable to the risks of the night-time economy.

Les Isaac co-founded the Street Pastors initiative nearly 20 years ago as a response to growing concern for the urban problems of gun and night crime, binge drinking, gang culture, loneliness, violence and anti-social behaviour.

Locally, we know young people have received heavy custodial sentences after being convicted of violence leading to near-fatal life changing injury. Those involved are known to have committed previous attacks, without being stopped by positive diversion or by police being able to engage the criminal justice system effectively before the worst, predictable attack.

Protocols rightly created to reduce the numbers of juveniles in court and cutting those with life changing convictions are not always appropriate. I am asking for a serious case review of another group of young people who are constantly putting at risk the security and the safety of youths and adults. Allowing impunity is not an option. Waiting for another very serious injury is wrong.

My caring team and I listen to the impotent tears of parents, broken by seeing their children violently attacked for no reason. Families are traumatised repeatedly. The law or the way it is applied must become more effective. I sympathise with valiant police officers and with brave public transport staff facing the continuing unacceptable behaviours.

It does not take much empathy or sympathy to understand what happens to a young person whose life is changed by an unprovoked attack on a three-minute train ride from school when a feral gang seeks a victim.

I understand the Crown Prosecution Service sat on a case until time limits required a serious charge to be reduced even though there was clear CCTV evidence to watch.

MPs can ask police, prosecutors and ministers to be clear about the strategy in similar cases. One good suggestion is to have an alert system, as for a major emergency, so County and Transport police have rapid action teams to attend reported incidents involving any established youth gangs. No individual officer or rail staff can deal alone with the extent of violence, disregard of authority and carefree defiance of norms of behaviour.

Act hard, fast and with commitment in every agency to get cases to court without delay.

Good youth activities are available all over the constituency and across the country. Some are based on faith organisations. I was glad to be present when the Muslim Charities Forum launched the report Bridges of Hope, celebrating the domestic social action including youth activities of British Muslim Charities.

Nearly half are women-led. They cooperate actively with a variety of public and private institutions to help local communities. I am grateful to the Worthing Islamic Society and to their leaders and members for taking a full positive role for good.