

Public Meeting on drug-dealing

May 15, 2017



We had a very interesting meeting last night (15 May 2017) at Blackhorse Baptist Church (thanks Malcolm!) about the continuing problem with drug-dealing around the St James St end of the High St. I wanted to share my own summary of the notes I took.

I'd estimate about 40 residents turned up (not bad for a 6pm meeting). Cllr Clare Coghill (soon to be Council Leader) "managed" the meeting, and Cllrs Grace Williams, Karen Bellamy and Sharon Waldron were also there. Detective Chief Superintendent Richard Tucker spoke on behalf of the police, supported by Superintendent Paul Clements, and PC Martin Lewis. Parliamentary candidates Okonu Obasi (LibDem) and Stella Creasy (Labour) both contributed questions and comments. Three Ward Panel Chairs or Vice-Chairs were there (High St, Markhouse, Cann Hall).

Accounts from residents were harrowing. "My customers are afraid." "There is no response to my calls." "These kids are walking around like bosses." "It breaks my heart that my children witness open drug-dealing in our street." "I want my children to feel safe, and not be accosted in the street, or exposed to fights. Older individuals are 'managing' younger children." "My 30-year old is constantly offered drugs in the street." "Supermarket security say they've given up calling the police." "I'm considering leaving the area. It's affecting jobs, investment in the area. The response is poor." "The area has been ceded to a gang. Their impunity is escalating." "Kids under ten are getting alcohol bought for them. The recent death hasn't shocked these people – we're still being challenged by that gang." "The dealing is blatant." "The gang has a lot of sophistication – smart avoidance of police." "The camera on the junction has raised a million pounds in traffic penalties." "Shopkeepers are involved." "I see people in expensive cars 'managing' the dealers." "As a parent, how can I cope with my children being groomed by gangs – what can I do?" "The Council hasn't bothered fixing the street lights there."

(Wow.)

Ukonu asked what is being offered to these young people to diver them from this activity, and what action is being taken about their suppliers? Grace spoke about the role of Childrens Services at the Council. Clare offered to pick up the street lighting issue. I asked: What can we do to help the police? Danielle from the charity Spark2Life spoke of the work they are doing locally.

The two senior police officers spoke quietly, and with evident conviction. “We can’t simply arrest our way out of some problems.” “I took an oath to protect the public, and I’m not into corporate platitudes.” “Our priority is to protect people from harm, especially vulnerable people. The greatest risk of harm isn’t always very visible. Vulnerable people had been having their homes taken over by dealers – many such ‘takeovers’ have been dealt with, denying the dealers their cover.” “We’ve been working on this for a long time, a mix of overt and covert operations, with a focus on ‘safeguarding’ – there are links to missing children and child sexual exploitation. Yet some of the most dangerous people are 14-year-olds on BMX bikes: how should we tackle these children?” “Old-style policing isn’t the whole answer – we can’t resource this problem forever. Kings Cross was once a really dangerous place – look at it now. We need the same sort of changes here.” “Meanwhile, extra officers are being drafted in to replace any lost through the inevitable ‘churn’ of police staff. Dispersal orders and ‘Section 60’ Stop & Search powers have been put in place against these boys.” “We’re tirelessly pursuing gangs and networks – we’re not as unsophisticated as we might appear. There really is a lot that we’re doing that I can’t say a word about.” “Displacement is not a solution – we need to take the nasty people out.” “There are 150 long-term drug-users locally. We need to address that demand.”

“There have been seventy arrests in the last six months. Twelve people have already been imprisoned. CCTV evidence has now led to an arrest today in connection with the stabbing of Elijah Dornelly.”

“Trust me. I will be back here in a couple of months when I’ve dealt with these people.”

Comment from me:

So, how was this received? Sometimes public meetings like this generate much more heat than light, with people only interested in getting things off their chest. But people were listening. I think the community there felt it was good and useful meeting. No-one had been pulling any punches, but I do think that most there were somewhat reassured by what these senior officers were telling us. The meeting ended with quite impassioned calls from Stella (and then also from me!) to keep feeding the police with reports – including, vitally, the sort of detail that changes an anecdote into intelligence - and both urged those there to talk to their neighbours and get more people to do the same. Residents were urged to join their local police ward panel.

No-one is minimising these awful problems, which have been blighting our community, especially over the last 18 months (?), when a new level of impunity and intimidation have seemed to develop. But while we know that these criminals have become adept at avoiding the police, we’ve heard that the police, the Council and other agencies are working closely together to clamp down on these people from every possible angle. I believe those at the meeting last night went away with significantly more confidence that something substantial is being done. But we will all want to see real change in due course.

Update: I’ve learned tonight (16 May) that after arrests, two men, aged 17 and 18, have been formally charged with Elijah’s murder.

Philip Herlihy

Chair, Waltham Forest Safer Neighbourhood Board

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