

Manifesto: Safety Campaign 2024

1. Why are we working on this?

Our member organisations serve households in some of the most disadvantaged communities where people face significant pressures from poor housing, few work opportunities and high crime rates. Whilst the three topics may have some connections - please see our separate manifestos covering housing and work - people feeling safe in their local neighbourhoods has been an integral part of our community organising over the past decade.

Ahead of the upcoming regional elections, our membership have identified two top priority issues of concern relating to safety:

- 1) The prevalence of youth violence and
- 2) The rise of everyday hate online and in-person targeting communities and individuals

Whilst there have been a number of published strategies on reducing youth violence by authorities and occasional news of good local events or projects, it seems impossible to find any current public plans online on what is taking place now or over the next 12 months where people live in the region. This can affect local trust and confidence that there is effective current action between agencies on the ground. It adds to a sense of feeling hopeless by some parents, teachers and community leaders that children and young people are any safer following the last high profile incident in their locality or when more news appears of local youth services being axed because of council budget cuts.

Hate crime offences in the West Midlands have significantly increased in recent years as Muslim, Jewish and LGBTQ communities are amongst those who've been affected by it the most. The prosecution rates still remain low. It also seems, every week there is a public figure (often connected to politics or journalism) across the country in the news for Racist, Islamophobic, Antisemitic, Homophobic and/or Misogynistic remarks or conduct. We feel this helps fuel everyday hate more widely in-person as much as it incites toxic behaviour online.

Our work in broad based community organising encourages and develops more people to take charge for the common good in leadership with their local school, place of worship, voluntary organisation or business. We have been seeing a steady rise in more local leaders, particularly women, facing harassment through online trolling and sometimes at public meetings/events with inadequate action or response from authorities.

2. Case studies

Dreamchaser Youthclub CIC in Small Heath and the BLESST Centre CIC in the city centre, like other community-led organisations in our membership, work with some of the most 'at-risk' young people in their localities affected by issues related to youth violence. They are amongst the few independent youthwork providers in the city as council budget cuts to youth provision are rolled out.

They regularly deliver different interventions such as homework support, mentoring, advocacy, drop-in youth club, weekly sports coaching, participation in trips including residential all whilst identifying a specific plan to meet the needs of each young person they work with.

In little over 3 months' time young people will be finishing school or college for the summer break. Both organisations are unable to fix what they can deliver during this crucial period as there is a lack of a co-ordinated plan by authorities on what it will commission for the year ahead and beyond across the city.

In the past 2 years, a number of faith, community and education leaders in our membership have reported the following abuse:

1. A church cancelled the venue booking of a 'community meeting' in their building where the organisers regularly incited hatred against others in the local area making false claims about them.
2. Headteachers experienced vile trolling and followed by threats in-person by some parents and members of the local community.
3. Community groups, especially those led by women, faced regular online local harassment about their work.

4. Key statistics to reflect the scale of the issue.

- [Birmingham accounts for 55% of all knife crime incidents in the region.](#)
- [Youth violent crime dropped by 9% in the past year across the region.](#)
- West Midlands has the 3rd highest rate of hate crime offences in the country (2022-2023 - see page 19 of [CBP-8537.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#))
- We've been unable to find any research on community trolling

5. Our track record (particularly how we are working locally and regionally to address the issue and develop solutions including co-design, any strong historic wins on related issues)

Birmingham Citizens has been campaigning on community safety since our founding in 2013.

On reducing youth violence

In our first ever city-wide campaign, we secured the commitment of NHS bosses to end the gap in access to specialist mental health treatment for 16-17 year olds (some 4,000 teenagers affected in the city) at our inaugural Accountability Assembly in May 2014.

Citizens UK was one of the first national partners of the #IWill Campaign which develops the capacity of young people aged 10-25 to get involved in Youth Social Action. So between 2014-2015, our member schools with community groups in their neighbourhood, persuaded local shops and businesses in a number of inner-city high streets to become [CitySafe Havens](#). Also at our Accountability Assembly in 2014, [two of our young leaders secured the support](#) of the then West Midlands Police Crime & Commissioner to the campaign.

In 2016, we delivered the first ever National Citizens Service project to use community organising training and recruit young people directly via local voluntary organisations - instead of sign-ups via their school. This was to increase participation of young people from underrepresented ethnic minority backgrounds. Two of the young people went onto deliver asks on behalf of their fellow youth leaders at our Mayoral Assembly in 2017 for free public transport for 16-19 year olds in education/training. In September 2017, the Mayor of the West Midlands acted by introducing [half-price travel for 16-18 year olds](#).

Since the announcement of the Commonwealth Games coming to Birmingham, we have consistently called for better access to free/low cost youth and sports facilities as well as the revamp of MUGAs (multi-use games areas) in parks leading up to the Games and as part of its legacy. In January 2024, [it was confirmed 17 Basketball courts in MUGAs will get revamped](#).

In 2021 at our Public Assembly ahead of the regional elections then, we raised the need for 'mental health counselling in schools & colleges' as an important action to improve youth safety producing this short [video clip](#).

Very soon after the election, the Combined Authority launched a [Mental Health Commission](#) focusing on young people with NHS & other public service leaders - to which we were invited to join. This was more than a roundtable meeting as we asked in that video. The Commission accepted within its recommendations the need for access to mental health counselling in schools, colleges and other education institutions, and in 2024 the Mayor of the West Midlands announced a [£1M fund to pilot it in colleges](#).

The big challenge now is to make that happen for schools with core funding. So, across our alliances in 17 towns and cities, Citizens UK are meeting MPs and decision makers nationally to include this in their general elections manifestos.

A significant number of our member voluntary organisations and social enterprises have consistently over multiple years delivered youth work alongside family support activities, often with little or irregular grant funding by authorities to meet the ever increasing need. Their top concerns have been the lack of long-term planning (12 months plus) of what authority's commission on the ground in local communities to tackle youth violence.

The financial situation of Birmingham City Council is leading to significant cuts to the work of the Children's Trust on 'Early Help' and local youth provision, thus applying further pressure on the need for a review of what is now out there and how agencies like the Violence Reduction Partnership may need to consider concrete local plans.

On preventing hate

A key characteristic of our work over the past decade has been the public turnout of communities in large numbers to strengthen relationships and act together to win change on common issues. Thus preventing the polarising of communities we work with.

Through regular local action and public assemblies every year between 2013 and 2023 (except 2020 due to the pandemic) we've brought thousands of people from across our member organisations and beyond closer together to win change on youth mental health, refugee welcome, the real living wage, safety and housing.

In 2014, we responded to a march held in Birmingham City Centre by a far right group by [gathering in solidarity at a nearby Synagogue](#) - going on to launch a city-wide refugee welcome campaign.

In 2015, immediately after the Paris Attacks tragedy we teamed up with the Diocese of Birmingham to hold [a large public vigil](#) to pay respects to those affected whilst standing in solidarity against division and hate. In 2016, we [hosted a public hearing for the Citizens Commission on Islam & Public life](#) in the city.

In 2018, we celebrated the Commonwealth Games news announcement with a major Assembly in the Birmingham Town Hall whilst [launching a set of citizens guarantees](#). We revisited those priorities [in 2022 at the University of Birmingham](#) shortly before the Games started.

In 2019, we teamed up with Aston University [to host the Law Commission](#) in the city during it's then review of Hate Crime legislation.

More recently, we teamed up with Birmingham Newman University in [2019](#), [2023](#) and [2024](#) to host Community Iftars during Ramadan on the theme of 'preventing hate'.

From 2021 to 2022, we supported [research](#) by Stephen Pihlaja at Birmingham Newman University which found how interacting with people of different faiths through the fundamental community organising tool of 1-2-1s both changed how people talked with one another, and how people understood their own religious identity.

In [2023](#), on International Women's Day (IWD) we brought women from member faith, education, business and community organisations together to launch a diverse 'Women in Leadership Network'. At their IWD event in [2024](#), they stressed the increasing challenges of hate and discrimination.

6. Our policy recommendations (2-3 headline asks with specifics bullet-pointed below)

We call on the next West Midlands Police & Crime Commissioner to make pledges on the following:

1. Will you publish long-term area action plans on how youth violence will be tackled on the ground in the different parts of the region?

So, people can find out everything that is actually happening or is being planned where they live or work to prevent youth violence - without having to attend regular meetings or a conference/summit to find out.

2. Will you work with other public agencies - in particular the Police, the NHS & local councils - to deliver staff training to improve how they undertake community engagement free from any incidents of abuse and harassment?