



By John O'Brien

One of the most depressing aspects of 2018, particularly in London, confined to it, has been the rise in youth violence and the many young people affected by crime.

Across the country, the issue is familiar with the story of gang related violence, horrific and dangerous, often used, and often fuelled by the story of 'county lines' of younger, vulnerable people. The trade is increasingly pervasive.

London, not surprisingly, is a focus of much attention. These issues often develop and have a significant impact on London's borders.

Clearly, urgent action is needed to tackle knife crime now, on our streets. Yet the violence are also the complex and multi-faceted need to be tackled by root causes. Short-term measures, working with the police, need to be complemented by long-term vision and planning which recognises the importance of local action in local communities.

Recently, we've worked with the mayor's office for police and the Metropolitan Police, as well as other criminal justice and public service partners, to take immediate actions that address this challenge. A package of measures has been made available for use and a framework for action planning agreed.

These are vital measures that we would recognise as a first step to gripping the problem and addressing its various faces. It is not even, but the scale of this issue means we must act with unwavering attention.

The importance of local work to address the root problem and focusing on the conditions that lead to this point to the importance of local preventative services. The Spending Review will be an investment, including enforcement against criminal services that address social issues, also has to be central to this.

John O'Brien in chief of London Councils



Let's face the facts

The subject of voter ID has divided many people, but **Bob Neill** calls for those sceptical about reform to catch up with the rest of the modern world

The morning of 3 May was just like any other sunny election morning. Doing the rounds from one polling station to the next, I witnessed a familiar scene. The same campaign wearied candidates returning from their dawn raids; the returning officers, chirpy and helpful as ever; and more than the occasional voter taking the obligatory selfie with their dog. It was business as normal across Bromley.

That, in itself, is a ringing endorsement, for Bromley was one of five local authorities trialling voter ID pilots this May. Despite the disproportionate brouhaha whipped up by different parties in the run up to the local elections, very little had in fact changed. To me, that comes as no surprise. These were well-planned, well-advertised practice runs.

Indeed, in Bromley, residents had five mailings alerting to them to this new requirement prior to polling day, and certain demographics, particularly older people, suspected to be more likely affected, were specifically targeted through more than 500 community organisations. Thanks to the hard graft that went into the pilots before their launch, not one voter I spoke to on the doorstep during the campaign raised any concern about, or worse, was unaware of, the trials.

Judging by the findings published by the Electoral Commission a fortnight ago, it appears this success was replicated across the board. In fact, nearly nine out of 10 people who voted on 3 May were aware of the new ID requirements. Almost everyone who went to vote was able to produce the right identification, and of those who couldn't, a very high percentage came back later in the day with the right documents. In

short, analysis drawn from a range of data sets suggest that turnout was unaffected.

To those who remain dubious of reform, even after reading the conclusions the commission has come to, I say this: it's time to face the facts.

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In most places, it's now harder to take out a library book or collect a parcel from the local post office than it is to vote. Why wouldn't we want to modernise our archaic electoral system? In doing so, we are simply bringing ourselves up to speed with many of our international counterparts, including France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Sweden, Norway, Ireland, Northern Ireland, the Netherlands, and India. It's also worth remembering that this forms just one component part of a much broader strategy designed to ensure the electoral process remains fit for purpose, including introducing anonymous voter registration for the survivors of domestic abuse.

True, there have been few successful convictions of electoral fraud recently, but absence of evidence isn't evidence of

absence. We still have highly localised pockets of corruption in parts of the country – Tower Hamlets being one example – which do real reputational damage.

Having been involved in politics since the 1970s, I have seen for myself a growing concern over things like double-voting, bribery and ballot tampering; clamping down on this perception of wrongdoing is almost as important as eradicating the wrongdoing itself. Doubt can be infectious, spreading like wildfire. We cannot allow it to creep into our electoral system.

That is why I am pleased the Government has committed itself to a further round of pilots elsewhere. I do not pretend there aren't issues that need to be ironed out before reform is rolled out universally, not least work that further considers how we can support vulnerable groups, like those with learning disabilities or people with sight loss, ensuring no one is disenfranchised. We should also think carefully about how we transfer the lessons from these local trials, applying them on a national scale. After all, General Elections often enjoy higher turnouts.

These are important, long-overdue improvements. Nurturing an active, engaged local electorate that has faith in the voting system should be an aim of every local authority. I hope, over the coming months, more councils will recognise the value of reform, putting their heads above the parapet to play their part in bringing about a safer, more reliable process. ■

Bob Neill is a former local government minister and chairman of the Justice Committee