

Appendix 4 Commissioners visit to Bollo Brook youth centre, Acton

Visit: Bollo Brook Youth Centre , located at Acton Gardens
Date: Thursday 12th August 2021
Attendees: Callum Anderson, Laura Forrester & Edmond Yeo
Host: Colin Brent, Senior Youth Worker

We spent half a day with 15 young people who regularly attend the Bollo Brook youth centre, to hear first-hand why the centre is important to them, the challenges they face as young people, how they feel about living at Acton Gardens and how COVID-19 has impacted their lives.



Commissioners Callum Anderson and Laura Forrester meet with Colin Brent, Senior Youth Worker at Bollo Brook Youth Centre

History

The London Borough of Ealing has three purpose-built youth centres, of which Bollo Brook youth centre is located at Acton Gardens formerly known as South Acton Estate. South Acton is very multicultural, it struggles with deprivation with many low-income families

residing in the area, drug misuse and the sale of drugs is still prevalent as is the existence of local gangs and associated knife crime.

The new youth centre was built as part of an £800m regeneration project, designed as a safe space for young people to hang out in, build friendships, take part in fun activities such as music production, arts and crafts, sports, cooking and gardening, and get support and advice. A place to help young people develop and learn new skills and support their journey into adulthood.

On South Acton Estate the original building was considerably larger with an outdoor space which hosted sports facilities such as hockey and basketball. The original youth estate population was around 800 young people, today this is more than 1000, and growing. In the transition phase between demolition and the build of the new development the youth centre was based in a portacabin with no outdoor space, but larger than its current home. Today, the building is owned by Acton Gardens Plc, a purpose-build building nearly half the size of the portacabin and smaller than the original youth centre with no outdoor space. Though the development led to an extra 1500 private homes, the number of flats for social rent were reduced to 280.

Bollo Brook Youth Centre opened on the day the police had enforced a (Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994) Section 60 stop and search power, this power is known to reinforce public perception that the police carry out stop and search without any official grounds. Many young people were stopped and searched that day, leading to raw feelings of intimidation which only engrained the resentment and anger that some young people already felt about the police.

The centre is supported by two full-time and two part-time youth workers, the demand on their time means they often work far longer hours than what they are contracted to do. Money to support music and art tutors is arranged through fund-raising, the Young Londoners Funding pays for the music studio.

South Acton Estate to Acton Gardens – Young people’s experience of how the development affected them	
<p>The new development is too high, it creates a visual wall between people - promoting distance and discouraging community growth.</p>	<p><i>Established families were not considered as relevant to the regeneration, building homes for new population that could gentrify the area was their key ambition.</i></p>
<p>They changed the name of where we lived without asking us, we simply did not matter.</p>	
<p>When the development was being built, they used hoardings used to market it – but they did not reflect the diversity of this area. There is a large Somali population, yet it was publicised to exclude diversity, none of the faces looked like our faces.</p>	<p>The estate was once made up of open gardens spread across the estate, some of these communal spaces have been taken away and replaced with gated gardens. This creates a divide, promoting a hierarchy system between homeowners and those who live in council homes. We are all divided.</p>
<p>A community is how we work together to create solutions, it’s not about causing greater confusion</p>	

Gang and Knife Crime on Acton Gardens

Acton Gardens is vulnerable to severe gang tensions, most recently members of a North London gang have visited the area more than 10 times, while always in possession of knives and machetes.

History of violence

July 2012 – 27-year-old male suffered gunshot wound and 22-year-old stabbed

October 2015 – 17-year-old stabbed to death

Three shootings post first lockdown

June 2021– Machete attack on young male (described below)

Machete Attack June 2021

An 18-year-old Dominoes delivery driver was attacked with a machete on the estate by a member of a North London gang. The young man had no affiliations to a gang and was mistakenly stabbed. To avoid further injury or death the youth centre worker ran out to provide him with a safe refuge at the centre. Residents living above the centre responded with anger when they discovered that the victim had been hidden in their communal garden, accessed from the upper floor of the youth centre. This led to a strong and vitriolic outcry that users of the centre were gang members and displayed behaviours and actions of criminals.

Since this incident more young people are stressed and hypervigilant, particularly 17-19-year olds. The sound of mopeds going by creates anxiety, they are in a constant state of fight or flight, this type of trauma is known to lead people towards gangs.

“A young person seeing a psychotherapist on a 1-2-1 basis is nothing new, trauma and PTSD is becoming normalised. We have to see everything from crackheads walking around to avoiding moped drivers in case we get stabbed.”

Yasmin, Bollo Brook Youth Centre User

“My older siblings experienced a more violent time growing up, I am a younger sister to older brothers, but maybe it’s because I have older brothers that I feel safer than some of my friends”

Sabrina (Year 6), Bollo Brook Youth Centre User

“The tension can harden friends, people change overnight.”

Anonymous, Bollo Brook Youth Centre User

“My cousin has his head bashed in one year ago and today he remains in a coma, families are destroyed when there is no support and no solutions”

Sana, Bollo Brook Youth Centre User

“A hero is someone who manages to hold their head high in this community”

Anonymous, Bollo Brook Youth Centre User

“Every time my son goes to work I think will I get a call today to tell me he has been stabbed or killed. I knew I would have to take this call one day - he is trying to pay our bills and yet the risk of knife crime and gangs makes this job difficult to do. It should not have to be like this.”

Mother of Victim

What Does Bollo Brook Youth Centre Mean to Me?

Regardless of what each young person’s needs are, the Bollo Brook Youth Centre looks to supporting all young people. They offer varying degrees of support with their:

- Educational needs
- Welfare needs
- Concerns about drug and substance misuse
- Aspirations to learn new skills and develop talent

Young people rely on the youth centre to support their interest in music, art, debate and discussion, individual space to explore new knowledge and having a safe space to socialise.

“I was leaving primary school for high school and this space helped me to make that transition”

12-year-old female

“I was bored at Acton High School, studied for 4 terms and felt like I was going nowhere. Before I came here, I was told negative things about the youth centre, since I have been coming it’s made me feel happy and I feel welcomed”

13-year-old male

“Struggling to complete schooling throughout COVID-19 and the lockdown, I did not necessarily complete the school work but coming to the centre gave me hope and allowed me to talk about it with others”

Teenage female

“Bollo is not just about the place, it’s about the people who come here, the people who work here, Colin, Yasmin and Sarah are passionate about this place, they care about us and they want the best

for us”

14-year-old female

“This is a shared space – for everyone. You come here and you might just connect with some of the people who are here, and that makes all the difference. Bollo has a very inclusive approach, where difference is accepted and celebrated, and people can relax.”

16-year-old male

“I can play pool, help out with the Jazmin food project and my art has improved!”.

15-year-old female

“I can practice singing and my art, play FIFA, debate about issues that matter to me such as the LGBTQT community.”

15-year-old male

“I only have older brothers, so it’s great to have a place like this where I can hang out with other girls”

12-year-old female

“There is a studio here for me to make music at and I can play pool, you don’t get that at school.”

13-year-old-female



Visiting Commissioners with Young people attending Bollo Brook Youth Centre

Bollo Brook Youth Centre's response to COVID-19

Prior to the lockdown the young people at Bollo were already aware of how vulnerable some of the community would be in response to a pandemic, particularly if people had to self-isolate. Their response to the lockdown was to set up the Borough of Ealing's first food distribution network. Forging partnerships with local organisations, the Felix project and assistance from social services they created a food distribution link between the youth centre and residents living on the estate. The number of people they catered for quickly increased, when reaching a peak of 550 -they transferred their operation base to the neighbouring building, the much larger community centre.-The food distribution network was set up by a 17-year-old female and four other young people, this group grew quickly to meet the increasing demand. It provided food for people from all backgrounds - refugee families, people living in sheltered housing units and the low-income families known to them through their informal networks.

Today-the food distribution continues to operate, they distribute every Friday, managed by young people linked based at the youth centre, feeding over 100 people every week.

"We don't need a pat on the back nor praise, we do it out of concern for the welfare of our neighbours."

Food Distribution Network Youth Volunteer

"There are so many elderly people, people who are lonely and need someone to talk to, to reach out to, and then there are people who have large families who could not feed their kids and we try to be there for them, to lookout for those who have a need".

Food Distribution Network Youth Volunteer

The Future of Bollo Brook Youth Centre

Over the last ten years the attendance at the youth centre has gone up by 600%. Since the beginning of the pandemic attendance levels continue to grow but at a much faster pace. Overcrowding, gangs, domestic issues, and drug dealing/misuse are some of the concerns that lead young people to the centre, it is their safe space where they can either discuss them or forget about them. Activities such as music and art help them to channel their stress and anxiety into creative output and allows them to develop new skills. The centre is a place of activity, space and social interaction that supports their learning, mental health, and well-being. Since the centre reopened for group work in April 2021, there have been over 4000 visits, 11-25-year olds from 94 wards across London have dropped into Bollo Brook.

Bollo Brook is not just a place for young people, parents who struggle with navigating the welfare system, have difficulty balancing their rent arrears or need urgent social services support but are unable to connect with public services rely on youth workers for their support and guidance. Pre-Covid the centre opened from 12-9pm, it currently operates reduced hours from 12-7pm, yet the youth workers continue to take calls late into the night, particularly when they are anxious parents looking for urgent care and support.

Recently when the young people were asked about installing a sculpture of an individual, they considered a hero - they turned down options proposed by housing developers. Instead, they asked to have a sculpture of their youth worker - ***“A hero is someone who manages to hold their head high in this community – our hero is Colin”***.