

POLICING THE PLAYGROUND: A NEW MODEL FOR SCHOOLS POLICING

Executive Summary

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This is an Executive Summary of the research report entitled 'Policing the Playground: a new model for schools policing'. This research examines a new Safer Schools Partnership model designed by police and local authority officials in Hackney. The 'Hackney model' was developed to address concerns about unintended harms and disproportionate policing in schools as outlined in multiple recent reports, as well as to adjust to new financial constraints facing the Metropolitan Police Service. We conducted policy development analysis and interviews with six non-statutory youth practitioners in Hackney, gaining their insights on the impact and effectiveness of the previous and new models. It concludes with a series of policy recommendations aimed at both improving outcomes for young people in schools and reducing the risk of harmful and disproportionate policing practices.

The new 'Hackney model' of schools policing

In 2024, Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and local authority officials in Hackney published a new draft Safer Schools Partnership model that would apply across the borough once finalised.¹ The new model seeks to incorporate recommendations made in the Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review report regarding Child Q,² a 2022 MPS review of disproportionality in schools policing,³ and a London Policing Ethics Panel report into schools policing.⁴ For MPS, the new model also functions as a pilot for how to operationalise a London-wide policy change made on 2 May 2025, which moved Safer Schools Officers (SSOs) into Neighbourhood Policing Teams.

The Hackney model seeks to create a single Safer Schools Partnership model for the entire borough and contains three key elements:⁵ (1) school-linked officers will no longer have a regular presence in schools and will instead act as 'tactical advisors', (2) school-linked officers will use intelligence data to identify and patrol certain routes ('Safer Corridors') outside of schools, and (3) each primary and secondary school will be given 20 points per school year which they can 'spend' on police-led activities in their school.⁶

This research qualitatively examines the Hackney model via interviews with youth practitioners, and analyses policy development in schools policing across London. We have sought to draw out insights relevant for MPS and officials in other local authorities as they consider how to operationalise the shift of SSOs into neighbourhood teams, in a way that:

- Meets MPS's commitments to reduce racially disproportionate policing.
- Identifies specific elements of the Hackney model that are evidenced as potentially effective or ineffective.
- Addresses existing and potential unintended harms of policing in and around schools for young people.

These insights will also be relevant for police forces and local authorities outside of London, as they consider how to structure the relationship between policing and education institutions.

1 Clarke, B. E. (2024) 'Safer Schools Partnership (Safer Schools Officers)' Hackney Council, 11 Sept 2024.

2 Gamble, J. and R. McCallum (2022) 'Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review: Child Q' CHSCP.

3 MPS (2022) 'Report: Safer Schools Officers (2022)' MOPAC.

4 London Policing Ethics Panel (2024) 'Policing London's Schools: supporting children to flourish?' London Policing Ethics Panel.

5 Clarke, B. E. (2024) 'Safer Schools Partnership (Safer Schools Officers)' Hackney Council, 11 Sept 2024.

6 Clarke, B. E. (2024) 'Appendix 1 – School Toolkit for Engagement' Hackney Council, 11 Sept 2024.

Key findings

1. Disproportionality in schools policing is linked to schools' disciplinary practices and policies.

The interview data indicates that some of the harms that arise from schools policing are part of a wider mix of practices and relationships in schools and the wider community. Interviewees noted that in Hackney, for a variety of reasons, many schools have adopted highly rigid disciplinary regimes in recent years. Disproportionality that arises from schools policing is therefore not solely a product of *policing* practices, but also a product of how *schools* respond to certain behaviours and students. In particular, many interviewees pointed to symptoms of institutional racism in schools.

2. Funding pressures have contributed to police delivering non-policing functions in schools.

The youth work funding crisis exacerbates these issues. With fewer and fewer services available to them, young people are less able to access long-term, sustainable support from professionals outside of the school environment. In addition, cuts to public services more widely have pushed police officers to 'fill the gap' and fulfil non-policing functions. For instance, participants indicated that where schools cannot afford to pay for other agencies to deliver specialist services – such as specialist PSHE classes – they may be more willing to accept an offer for a school-linked police officer to do so for free, despite concerns about police-led educational provision.

3. Pedagogical activities delivered by police undermine the Hackney model's ability to reduce disproportionality.

It is acknowledged among those who designed the new Hackney model and mentioned by interviewees that police delivery of non-policing functions is a key source of disproportionality in schools policing. This is because the more contact young people have with police, the more likely young peoples' actions will be recorded as crimes due to the Home Office Crime Recording Rules.

Further, interviewees' contributions indicate that some young people feel highly unsafe around police officers, and have harmful physiological reactions when they are forced to encounter them. The Hackney model generally seeks to reduce this contact, but this is undermined by the activities Toolkit, which offers multiple forms of police-led educational provision to schools.⁷

4. Partnership working with youth practitioners can increase the effectiveness of the police-school relationship.

A lack of trust and confidence among young people in police is a significant barrier to the effectiveness of police-led pedagogical activities and a potential barrier to the effectiveness of the Safer Corridors initiative. While police-led Toolkit activities are aimed at increasing trust and confidence, it is unclear how they will do so, and there is little pre-existing evidence that they have done so in other contexts. Most respondents identified supportive roles that the police could play in partnership with a range of professionals who work with young people, which differ from the leading roles included in the Hackney model. These supportive activities (such as police supporting youth worker-led interventions or pedagogical activities rather than e.g., delivering workshops on their own) could fulfil MPS's and schools' intended aims for the police-school relationship, while reducing the unnecessary contact between young people and police that contributes to disproportionality and unintended harms.

5. Policing policies and practices that impact young people should be adequately monitored and evaluated.

Given the significant impact the new model will have on young people, pre-existing evidence and this research found that the ability to monitor and evaluate it against a set of clear intended outcomes and performance indicators would ensure that it is targeted, impact-led, and works towards the goal of eliminating unintended harms and disproportionality in policing.

7 Clarke, B. E. (2024) 'Appendix 1 – School Toolkit for Engagement' Hackney Council, 11 Sept 2024.

Policy recommendations

See [the report](#) for further detail on each of these recommendations, including the underpinning evidence and intended outcomes of each.

Governance

1. Police forces should produce a framework of intended aims and outcomes for how police and schools interact with one another, linking each to key pre-existing force-wide commitments (e.g., around disproportionality, or young people) which should then form the basis for the design of Safer School Partnerships (SSPs).
2. Police forces should ensure that SSP models contain relevant performance indicators – drawn from the framework referred to in recommendation 1 – that can be used to measure models' success at achieving their intended outcomes and advancing key commitments.
3. Police forces should, in consultation with affected community members, produce a locally-tailored Terms of Reference for school-linked officer roles clarifying their remit and how they interact with other professionals, and explicit reference to the intended outcome of each activity undertaken by the role-holder (based on the framework in recommendation 1).

Role of school-linked officer

4. Police forces should design SSPs such that school-linked officers do not have a regular presence within schools.
5. Police forces should consider ensuring that guidance and trainings for school-linked officers include best practice for building relationships with local youth organisations.
6. The National Police Chiefs' Council should consider suggesting that school-linked officers produce localised versions of the 'When to call the police' guidance⁸ which include suggestions for local non-statutory organisations to refer young people to in specific circumstances.

School-linked officer activities

7. Police forces and schools should take steps to fulfil the aims of SSPs while minimising contact between officers and young people, to reduce the unnecessary recording of children's behaviour as crimes where a criminal justice response is inappropriate.
 - a. Pedagogical activities should be delivered by professionals with the most appropriate skills and knowledge or, at minimum, in partnership with them. Young peoples' participation should be made optional.
 - b. 'Safer Corridors' patrols outside of schools should be intelligence-led and delivered with non-policing professionals whose roles are clear to young people, the makeup of which reflects the aims of each specific patrol. Young people should be notified in advance.

Policy development

8. Police forces should ensure that officers responsible for consultations have sufficient resource to design and deliver meaningful processes that engage community organisations, young people, and parents with experience of the issues a new proposal seeks to address.
9. Police officials responsible for consultations should consider seeking to engage people who have had negative experience with the police. This could be achieved, in part, through seeking feedback on consultation design, remuneration for engagement, partnership working with non-statutory youth organisations, and increasing transparency.

Monitoring and evaluation

10. Police forces should regularly collect and publish data related to schools policing to enable monitoring and evaluation of the impact of school-linked officers' activities on young people. This data should be used to regularly to assess proportionality.
11. Violence Reduction Units and What Works Centres should consider investing in research that evaluates the impact and effectiveness of various models that govern how schools and police interact.

⁸ NPCC (2020) 'When to call the police: guidance for schools & colleges' NPCC.