

## **My Life | My Choice Learning Programme Background**

A citywide programme aimed at tackling issues of gang culture and weapon carrying will be launched across Birmingham late 2010.

The programme – My Life, My Choice – has been commissioned by Birmingham Reducing Gang Violence (BRGV), part of the Safer Birmingham Partnership and includes West Midlands Police and Birmingham City Council, working together for a safer city.

### **Development Process**

The learning resource is the culmination of months of targeted work that began with a citywide consultation with young people to draw out perception data around gang-related issues. This focused on two aspects:

1. Understanding young people's experiences of gangs and weapons;
2. Exploring those messages that they thought would most influence their peers to bring about attitudinal and behavioural change.

This led on to scriptwriting sessions that drew directly from the findings of the research whereby secondary students developed a storyline that reflected that experience.

The resulting 30-minute film is part of a learning resource that will explore and expose the urban myths surrounding gang affiliation.

Director of Inclusion Services at Birmingham's Children's Directorate, Chrissie Garrett said: "The purpose of the film will be to raise awareness of the whole gang issue and get young people talking about it. We want them to understand the negative impact of gangs and recognise the consequences of involvement with them."

The supporting lesson plans were developed in consultation with local teachers and educationalists to ensure they met the Birmingham context. These are linked to the citizenship and personal, social and health education (PSHE) curricula but also work in a variety of targeted youth support settings.

### **About the film**

The story centres on a young, aspiring rap artist – Nathan – who is caught between wanting his independence and wanting to protect his family. Nathan faces difficult choices that draw him into the gang lifestyle with devastating consequences.

The film draws from the real life experiences gathered from the consultation and is used as a mechanism to explore concepts of choice, consequences, conflict and control and identity as well as examine the wider impact of gang behaviour on local communities.

The film features a group of young local acting hopefuls, including Hockley 'grime' artist Romo, aged 19, and Erdington drama student Laschelle Cole, 16.

Romo (Ramone Dawkins) brings both musical and acting talents to 'My Life, My Choice', depicting the character of Nathan. He said: "The film is a good representation of life in some Birmingham communities. A lot of young people will find themselves in a similar position because things like this do happen in everyday life."

He added: "The message of my music – and this film – is positive. I am aware that I have a young audience and I try not to promote negativity. I want to try and set an example."

Laschelle Cole is one of four young people from the Sutton Coldfield campus of Birmingham Metropolitan College who have taken part in My Life, My Choice. Half-way through a two-year BTEC qualification in Performing Arts, she has a very personal reason for wanting to get involved with the project.

Laschelle's father Mark was stabbed in the spine during an evening out at a Birmingham nightclub. As a result, he is unable to walk.

Laschelle said: "I know what it is like to have your life affected by crime. My dad was stabbed when I was little and I have always thought 'How can anyone do something like that?' There is never any need for something like that."

She added: "The film demonstrates that at any time in your life your circumstances can change as a result of one decision. Life is too short for being in gangs; there is no need for it. We shouldn't have to live in a society where one group of people is scared of another."

'My Life, My Choice' is part of a wider BRGV strategy that aims to coordinate education resources for schools throughout the city and work towards eradicating gang violence.

Supporting 'My Life, My Choice' will be on-line games aimed at transitional Year 6 to 7 pupils, with a separate package for Year 9 and 10 students. The online game features iconic Birmingham cityscapes with scenarios built into each scene. Drug use, peer pressure and bullying are just some of the topics covered, giving secondary students the opportunity to make their own decisions as to how they would respond. Featuring film clips of advice from real-life city peers, they are encouraged to consider and debate issues, which can affect them in their daily lives.

Describing 'My Life, My Choice' as a 'unique opportunity', Jayne Welch, who leads one of the city's pupil referral units, said: "Our pupils were made to feel that their contributions were vital to the success and integrity of the project. Their engagement and concentration was a joy to watch. They engaged freely – clearly feeling safe and respected in this forum. This was literacy at its best – speaking, listening, reading and writing for a real purpose and end product."

Birmingham Cabinet member for local services and community safety Councillor Ayoub Khan added: "It is important that we continue to work in schools to raise awareness of the negative impact that gun and gang crime can have on our communities and on the young people involved."