

Stop squandering the taxpayers' money, Ken

Money wasted on organisations connected with the Mayor's adviser Lee Jasper could instead be used to transform the lives of disadvantaged children, says the Conservative mayoral candidate

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LIFE in London has improved in so many ways since the early 1970s, when I used to knock around Camden as part of a gang — or gaggle — of children. The food was nothing like as good. We had neither iPods nor mobiles.

No one used to brag that London was the financial and cultural capital of the world. And yet every day we did things that many modern London parents would consider unthinkably daring.

We used to cycle to the park or to school. We used to walk the streets to buy ice cream without the slightest fear of being molested. I don't think we were particularly namby-pamby or bourgeois, but none of us carried knives.

The idea that kids would be regularly shooting and stabbing each other in disputes over postcodes would have struck us as the stuff of science fiction. So when I look at what is happening on the streets of London today, I am filled with rage and disbelief that we have lost so much, and are doing so little about it.

With the death of 16-year-old David Nowak, the tally of teenagers murdered in London this year has reached 26. Then there are the countless kids who have suffered lesser wounds, and the spiralling number of unreported thefts and bashings and assaults. With 50 children arrested this year for serious gun crime, and with the Met warning that they are struggling to cope with the culture of gangs, the penumbra of violence is in danger of spreading over the entire city — filling people with apprehension in areas that are completely and demonstrably safe.

I want our children to feel as secure on the streets as we did; and of course that means more police. It means working with the Met to release officers from filling out forms, and getting them out on the street. It means beefing up the Safer Neighbourhood teams, finding people in uniform to end the appalling rowdiness on buses and restoring a sense of security to railway platforms.

It means taking crime seriously and not just handing out fixed penalty notices for what used to be regarded as serious offences. We can do more to detect knives, and I would certainly support the use of more mobile scanners. But we all know that if we are to solve the problem of gangs, we must do more than rely on the forces of law and order.

We are feeling the shocks of massive social change. These children are growing up without any sense of authority, without role models, without boundaries, and with their self-esteem vested entirely in the gang and its hopeless materialist culture. That is why we need also to boost the many voluntary groups across London that have the courage and patience to engage with these children.

There are hundreds of people who are working with kids and their families, using sport, art, music — anything to steer them away from the catastrophic choice of life in the gang. These groups need encouragement and support, and that is why it is so infuriating that the current Mayor of London is doing nothing to help them, and instead is squandering millions on the pet projects of his cronies, without any visible return.

I have seen how much good these volunteers can do, at Prospex in Islington, or XLP or Kids Company in south London. If we had 100 people like Ray Lewis, who runs the Eastside Young Leaders, the problems of London would be all but over. He takes some of the hardest, toughest, most damaged kids from the black community, and by sheer force of personality he gives them discipline and he gives them hope. I have seen how he manages their anger, and gives them confidence. He and his staff transform the lives of these young males, setting them on the path to good schools and university.

Ray doesn't get a penny from the Mayor of London, or from any of his funds. Why not? I expect it is because Ray is defiantly and incorrigibly politically incorrect. In Livingstone's London, you can't expect cash if your organisation has the slightest whiff of Christianity; and even if their faith is hardly ever mentioned, that rules out some of London's most effective and imaginative volunteers.

Where does the money go instead? We don't know, exactly, but all the evidence is that millions are being squandered on organisations connected with Lee Jasper, without any tangible benefit to the people of London. This cash could be used to transform the lives of young Londoners, and to stop them turning to lives of crime and gangsterism. Instead, it is being used for politics.

It is increasingly obvious that some London Development Agency funds have been used as a slush fund by the Mayor and his cronies to pass money to groups with which they have close personal links and which serve as their political amen corner within the black community.

It is an utter disgrace, and yet anyone who dares question the order of things is denounced as a "racist" — an accusation Livingstone now seems to have graciously retracted in my case. It is the politics of the skunk — making a smell and then scuttling away in the hope that nobody notices. Well, people have now noticed his tactic, and they have noticed what is going on in the LDA.

The Mayor must either show us exactly how the money has been spent on Brixton Base and the Black Londoners Forum, and all the other groups associated with Lee Jasper, or he must bow to cross-party calls for an independent investigation. There is something chilling and Stalinist about his refusal to comply, as though the Mayoralty was his personal fiefdom, and the money was his to spend. It's not. It's taxpayers' money. It is now up to the Mayor to come clean, and produce that audit trail.

It could have been spent on some of the most disadvantaged kids in London. It could have been spent breaking down the gang culture that is eroding the quality of life of millions of Londoners. And in future it should be.