

Churches should play a key role in combating serious youth violence in their communities, according to a motion unanimously backed by General Synod today.

Members of the Church of England’s national assembly voted by 315 to zero in support of a motion calling on the church’s national bodies, dioceses and education boards to take practical steps both to help prevent violence such as gun and knife crime and to support those affected.

The debate called for Diocesan Boards of Education to encourage alternatives to excluding children from school; for dioceses to provide more training for church leaders and for the church to work more with other organisations to provide support and pastoral care for those affected.

The Revd Canon Dr Rosemarie Mallett, a priest in Angell Town South London, who led the debate, spoke of the need for weapons bins, which provide a “practical and prophetic witness” to Christians’ calling to be peacemakers in a society where youth violence has risen rising.

Many of the speeches asked for churches to be open as "safe places" to protect young people from being harmed by – or drawn into – gangs.

Dr Mallett, a member of the Mission and Public Affairs Council, said: “At present churches are remarkably good at responding when a death occurs on our patch.

“However, our contribution is mostly reactive, and this motion is calling upon the church to be proactive.

“We must remember that the stories of violence among young people are not simply ‘their’ stories, they are ‘our’ stories, not only through our common creation in the image of God but also because these young people are part of our communities, many either attending a church school or living in the local area.

“In some parishes families of perpetrators and victims live side by side, and there the church can be a place not only of pastoral care for individuals but also repentance, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation with each other and with God.”

She added: "We can sometimes see this as just an urban issue. But, with middle class drug taking fuelling the rise in 'county lines' drug trafficking, vulnerable young people are groomed and exploited to feed this lifestyle and violent crime in our coastal, university and market towns has increased.

"One of the young men from my parish was moved for safety to Portsmouth and was shot dead there not long after."

Synod heard stories from the floor about different cases of serious youth violence in communities across the country.

Kashmir Garton, a lay member from the Diocese of Worcester who works as a senior manager within the criminal justice system, said: “The Church is in a unique position to be proactive in such situations as it exists in every parish community; it is present at key life events and is involved in the delivery of education in its church schools, Sunday schools, toddler groups and youth groups”.