

West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit

The Place-Based Evaluation



Dr. Aleksandra Kazlowska¹, Alison Thompson², Debbie Kerslake³, Jeanettes Derbyshire⁴, Katarzyna Gut⁵, Shazia Baig⁶ and Wasim Abbas⁷

March 2021



THE UNIVERSITY OF OPPORTUNITY

¹ University of Birmingham

² Community Researcher

³ Community Researcher

⁴ Community Researcher

⁵ Community Researcher

⁶ Community Researcher

⁷ Community Researcher

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1. Introduction

Background

The overall aim of the place-based evaluation is to gain a fuller understanding of the work of the VRU within specific local areas, taking account of the whole of the place-based activity and building on the individual project evaluation.

Key Deliverables

The most important deliverables agreed after the amendment of the initial submission were to conduct place-based evaluation in four areas decided by the VRU.

Overview

The place-based evaluation has explored what progress is being made by the pilots towards the VRU outcomes of:

- developing a collaborative, whole-system approach with a clear focus on public health (Public Health England 2019);
- stopping violence by tackling the root causes;
- increasing the aspirations for all young people to ensure that they have the opportunity to succeed and fulfil their potential;
- supporting engaged, compassionate, resilient communities;
- taking a shared approach that nurturing children at every age is appropriate.

In addition, the evaluation has looked at:

- What is the perception of violence and safety in communities and potential solutions?
- What is the level of visibility and understanding of the approach and work of the VRU?
- How the pilots have engaged with local communities and what could be done to engage them more?
- What community assets exist (both formal and informal) that violence reduction can draw upon?
- What are the key levers and barriers in achieving the VRU outcomes?
- How the community assets have changed as a result of the interventions?
- How inequality, deprivation and ethnic diversity relate to the challenges, development and outcomes of the pilots?
- What the impact of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter has been on the work of the pilots?
- If there are any gaps in existing provision in relation to violence reduction work?
- What the mechanisms are to ensure that local people own and continue to take forward the local pilot projects, with identified success measures?

2. Approach and Method

Our approach has been guided by an understanding of how the VRU's approach to violence reduction takes into account spatial dependence and the usage of social and institutional networks locally. We draw on Samson's (2006) notion of collective efficacy understood as the process of stimulating or transforming social ties among residents in a given neighbourhood to accomplish collective goals. Brunton-Smith, Sturgis and Leckie (2018) highlight that collective efficacy can be perceived as a combination of networks, values and norms (e.g. reciprocity) that enable individuals and communities to become resilient and deal with negative behaviour. Therefore, we have been concerned with developing an assessment of the degree of trust and network building at the local level in order to assess the contextual basis in which the VRU's programme was piloted.

We have assessed the way in which the VRU's programme was designed and implemented at a local level, including how the VRU understands the function and role of the place as a factor and context of violence. It has been recognised that the outcome and impact

evaluation of the pilots in terms of the levels of crime, fear of crime and resident behaviour are difficult to measure due to the nature of the interventions and their timescale (so at the evaluation itself). There are many challenges to measuring the type of work being undertaken by the VRU, notably the fact that outcomes and impacts may not be seen for years and it is difficult to attribute change to one particular intervention.

The aim was to evaluate the VRU's place-based approach over the life of the project by developing capacity amongst the resident population. The original intention of the place-based evaluation was to deliver bespoke peer-to-peer training to a cohort of local residents in each pilot area, who would then seek the views of others in their neighbourhood. This would contribute to the development of collective efficacy, gaining trust amongst resident experts by experience and delivering accredited research training to bolster capacity and upskill the local population. This element of the work would then be complemented and extended through analysis of relevant administrative data sets. This would also deliver a longer-term sustainable model of evaluation through peer-to-peer training and research to support the work of the VRU. However, due to the pandemic, the community research training, including the recruitment of new community researchers and co-developing and co-delivering the place-based research with them, could not go ahead. Instead, the place-based research team needed to rely on their already trained and experienced community researchers to carry out the study. It is recognised that although the community research team is diverse in terms of age, gender and ethnicity, it is representative of the community within the inner-city wards of Birmingham where the USE-IT!⁸ Project took place, rather than the four areas that were chosen for this piece of work.

The training element was replaced by more extensive and multi-method research including interviews; observations of youth forums, residents' and stakeholder network meetings, awareness-raising and training sessions, online service delivery and informal conversations with local residents. The current restrictions as a result of Covid-19 have inevitably impacted on progress in undertaking the work. All interviews and observations have had to take place online.

The following areas were chosen to be the case studies for the place-based research- Hillfields in Coventry, Three Estates, Kings Norton in Birmingham and Walsall. These areas were selected because the work of the VRU was well-established in these places in Phase One and each had a different focus (Hillfields with primary, secondary and tertiary preventative interventions, Three Estates with a wide range of youth engagement and Walsall working in two educational establishments). It was agreed with the VRU that some exploratory work would also be undertaken in Dudley, where the pilot commenced during Phase Two.

Consultation took place with the Community Navigator for each area to agree a bespoke approach, based on the general qualitative framework developed by the place-based team.

⁸ USE-IT! - Unlocking Social and Economic Innovation Together, a project with the aim of pioneering innovative approaches to inclusive urban development in West Birmingham and Smethwick, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/business/research/research-projects/city-redi/use-it-unlocking-social-and-economic-innovation-together.aspx>

This included up to 15 in-depth interviews (with key stakeholders who are significant actors in the local community and/or members of the steering group, provider organisations delivering the VRU pilots and local residents and users of services) and ethnographic studies including the observations and informal conversations as detailed above. The research also draws on the expertise of the community navigators in each selected area.

The interviews explored areas including:

- the interviewee's organisation and role and their involvement with the work of the VRU
- the features and characteristics of the area, important for understanding violence and its reduction and impacting on the pilot
- perceptions of safety in the area
- understanding of the work of the West Midlands VRU including the main aims, objectives, activities and outputs
- how the local pilots have tried to bring about change
- the key levers and challenges to achieving the VRU outcomes
- engagement with local communities
- local community assets
- how the success of the VRU can be measured
- how the sustainability of the work can be ensured
- what can be done to prevent young people getting involved in knife crime

The pilots were underway at the time mass protests were taking place following the death of George Floyd in the US. It was agreed that it was appropriate to explore the responses of the pilots to the events of the summer of 2020 and the call for change from Black Lives Matter.

It was also important to explore the impact of Covid-19 on each of the pilots.

3. Place-Based Evaluation of the Pilots

3.1 Hillfields, Coventry

3.1.1 Evaluation Process in the Pilot Area

14 interviews were undertaken with a range of stakeholders, including a representative from a local radio station, a journalist who has explored the views of local residents and businesses, the police, youth violence prevention services, providers including family and community services, early years provision, organisations supporting young people at risk of criminal exploitation and refugees and asylum seekers, local residents and the Community Navigator.

Observations have taken place of five steering group meetings, two ACEs training sessions (which were attended by a number of local providers), an awareness-raising session for parents on gangs and county-lines and the weekly short films on YouTube during lockdown produced by a service supporting young people at risk of exploitation.

3.1.2 Perceptions of the Area

Hillfields was described as a bustling, youthful, multi-cultural area with a very strong sense of community with everyone knowing everyone else. It has a diverse range of independent shops and restaurants. Local residents talked about a sense of pride in coming from the area and share an interest in initiatives to improve the locality, but Hillfields can have a negative impression outside of the area and sometimes people can buy into these outsiders' views of their community.

The sense of community was particularly evident following a serious arson attack on a tower block when local people offered to take in residents who had lost their homes⁹.

I live in the building where there was a fire before. People here, they didn't know you, they just live in Hillfields, they come to just take some people to their house because they see them in the street. The people here are very good.

However, Hillfields has high levels of inequality, social deprivation and poverty. The West Midlands VRU Strategic Needs Assessment references the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index which shows how deprivation adversely affects the young people who are growing up in Hillfields, one of the most deprived parts of the country (WM VRU 2021). Hillfields is 37th out of 356 neighbourhoods in the West Midlands in the Index. It ranks 56th for the number of pupils not achieving good development in Early Years.

The West Midlands VRU has designed a risk index based on three factors with the strongest correlations towards violence helping to understand risk at a neighbourhood level:

- Deprivation affecting children
- Rates of mental health
- Lack of educational development in early years

In terms of risk Hillfields ranks 6th out of 42 neighbourhoods in Coventry and 84th out of 356 in the West Midlands.

Sidney Stringer, a large mixed state secondary school in Hillfields has more than 400 pupils eligible for free school meals. 93% of its pupils are non-White and more than three quarters live in households where English is not the first language. Despite these challenges, it is rated Outstanding by Ofsted and its three-year average permanent exclusion rate in secondary schools is less than the national average. The permanent school exclusion rate in all the secondary schools in and around Hillfields is typically lower than the average in the

⁹ Coventry flats fire: Arson arrest after blaze in Hillfields, BBC News Online, 12th Sept, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-coventry-warwickshire-54129849>

West Midlands and the national average of 0.2%, providing an additional protective factor for young people already at risk of being involved in violence.

Interviewees describe a downward spiralling of the economy with businesses and shops closing and services withdrawing. Unemployment rates are high and there is a lack of opportunities/pathways for young people. For example, the percentage of workless households in 2019 in Coventry was 17.3 in comparison to 15.3 in West Midlands and Great Britain, with Hillfields standing out in the area¹⁰. The quality of housing is poor and there are an increasing number of houses of multi-occupation and a growing student population, resulting in a more transient population, who do not have a long-term commitment to the area and as such may lack attachment and not care for their area. Budget cuts over the past ten years have resulted in significant cuts to youth services and the police having limited resources to do preventative work such as developing relationships with the local community. More recently people feel that there has been a lack of investment in the area, seeing huge investment going into new high-rise buildings in the neighbouring wards whilst they are fighting for local community resources. There are limited green spaces and lots of fast-food outlets which contribute to the litter in the area, as well as having a negative impact on people's diets and health. The area looks unkempt and neglected.

It's mainly the perception of the place, it intimidates people. It's how it looks: highly congested areas, the graffiti on the walls, the litter, and the broken lamps, street furniture, cracked pavement slabs, abandoned vehicles.

Although the 'Broken Windows' theory is debated and even sometimes disregarded in the literature (see for example Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Thacher 2004), the participants of our research linked neglected and deteriorating neighbourhoods with the possible impression of the absence of control and the higher likelihood of crime.

There is a sense that low-level problem behaviour such as illegal parking, litter and feeding the pigeons are ignored by the police (who were clear that this is not their responsibility) and the local authority, adding to the perception of local residents that their area is not valued.

We were told that discussions have taken place between Councillors, the Local Authority, community organisations and Citizen Housing about how the green spaces can be developed, but these have not been taken forward. The main centre of Hillfields, Hillfields Square, is faced with the difficulty of trying to be a location that is owned and appreciated by local people whilst remaining a safe environment. One interviewee described how Aston University undertook a project, proposing to bring in architects and re-design the Square, including listening to children to get their views on how the Square could be improved, but this work was not progressed either. In an attempt to reduce the number of places where knives can be hidden and homeless individuals can sleep during the day, benches have been removed, a large tree cut down and planters taken away. 'Safer Streets' money is being used to provide enhanced street lighting, CCTV (particularly well received by residents), gating of the alleyways and play areas for children, which has been welcomed, but whilst

¹⁰ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157187/printable.aspx>

residents felt that it might now be a safer place, the area lacks beautification and *looks as though it feels sorry for itself*. This has a negative impact on people's mental wellbeing. There were also some criticisms about the lack of discussions with local residents about how to improve safety within the Square. There was a sense that the police had had money that needed to be spent quickly, so decisions had been taken with limited consultation.

Residents talked about the lack of play areas, particularly in view of the number of people living in tower blocks without gardens. There are areas of grass between the blocks, but no swings or other equipment for children to play on.

It is a very diverse area with a high proportion of people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities including a lot of newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers living alongside longstanding residents (individuals from 72 nationalities are being supported locally by an organisation supporting refugees and asylum seekers)¹¹. It has been described as 'The Arrivals Hall of Coventry'. The area was described as being *culturally rich* but also as having a *bit of a culture clash* and a *complex mixture of cultures*. Some residents described their experiences of racism and abuse from the white settled population. They also talked about friction between some groups, particularly between the Somalian and Afghan communities and the isolation of others such as the Roma Gypsy community. Many languages are spoken within a small area and a significant number of people do not speak English, leaving them feeling disempowered. 25% of households have no members with English as a first language (WM VRU 2021). It was suggested that the number of people who have come from countries where there is an ingrained fear of the police or a belief that they are corrupt, leads to a distrust of the police and an unwillingness to report incidents.

Some participants described Hillfields as a 'traumatised community', as a consequence of many residents having experienced trauma in their country of origin. It was suggested that, the prevalence of violence may have de-sensitised some residents to the incidents they witness in Hillfields and increase the risks of young people being criminally exploited. Added to this are more established residents who have been the victims of arson attacks, domestic abuse and violence or who have witnessed serious incidents including stabbings and shootings leading to a community that one provider described as 'living on survival instincts'. This includes a high level of trauma amongst children and young people which can go unrecognised or be misdiagnosed.

3.1.3 Perceptions of Violence and Safety

Hillfields and the city centre experience the highest level of recorded crime in Coventry and the rate has increased in recent years. It is five times higher than the Coventry average. The area experiences higher rates of violent crime, possession of weapon offences and anti-social behaviour than other parts of Coventry, the West Midlands or England in general (WM VRU 2021). The 12-month total of incidents of violent crime recorded by police in Hillfields is 48 per 1,000 residents. The average in England is 29. The rate of recorded possession of weapons offences in Hillfields is almost double the West Midlands average

¹¹ <https://www.coventry.gov.uk/ethnicity>

which itself is 50% higher than the national rate. Antisocial behaviour is the largest proportion of the total number of recorded crimes followed by violent and sexual offences. The Household Survey (2018) found that 39% of residents felt unsafe at night compared to the Coventry average of 26%.

The figures included in the Strategic Needs Assessment support the concerns of our interviewees about the level of crime taking place in the area, but what was particularly highlighted by the interviewees we spoke to was also the openness and normalisation of, for example, substance abuse and drug-dealing, with no effort to hide it. As one participant put it: *I think it's just so widespread, that it's kind of the norm.* There are many instances of cuckooing with the commandeering of residences of often vulnerable groups for the purposes of drug dealing and supply. There has been mentioned a lack of visibility of the police due to budget cuts, though residents felt there had been more of a police presence in recent months. This results in what has been described as a feeling of 'lawlessness' and the normalisation of criminality, with drug dealers operating quite openly with no apparent fear of repercussions. We were told that shopkeepers are resigned to the level of crime. It has come to be perceived as the red-light district of Coventry with sex workers working on the streets during the day, visible to children walking to and from school.

There have been serious incidents with stabbings as well as shootings. The main street, Primrose Hill Street is known as 'the frontline'. The rapper and grime artist Pa Salieu, who was raised in Hillfields, described the street in his track 'Frontline'¹². One mum interviewed said: *My kids see people punching each other. They see people killing each other. In this year we had two people killed in the street. And my kids they very small, you know. It is terrible..... My kids get scared, if anybody knocks my door they hide.*

A fatal shooting¹³ took place outside of the nursery school in March 2020, with the shots being heard by the children, causing huge stress to the parents:

And I never forget last year, the children's centre and my small kids there and I hear these shots and it was like the building shake. When I look I see like a lot of people running to that place and the police in front of my daughter's nursery. I feel I'm dying. I just running with nothing. When you hear something like something happened to your daughter and when I arrive there I find the police are surrounding there. "I need to see my daughter", he said "No, you can't pass". I said "I must, you can't stop me I need to be sure my daughter is okay". And one teacher from the school he said "No, no, she is one of the mums, she needs to enter". And he said "All of them are safe".

The same participant described the trauma experienced by her friend when at the local pharmacy, she was confronted by a man covered in blood asking for help who had just shot someone.

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laQjlagBnG0>

¹³ <https://www.coventrytelegraph.net/news/coventry-news/coventry-nursery-school-temporarily-closed-17929583>, CoventryLive, Madeline Clark, 16th March 2020.

The threat posed by gangs and knife-crime are major concerns. The majority of the violence is youth-on-youth incidents. The two 'urban street' gangs in Coventry compete against each other with one having control over the city centre and the Hillfields area (CV2) who live, socialise and recruit there.

People pass through Hillfields to get to the city centre creating a fragile environment, with what can be perceived as no-go areas and violence being fuelled by individuals encroaching onto each other's territory. Incidents taking place in the city centre spill-out into Hillfields. Drugs are the main driver with young people who started off as street gangs now being used for drug running. Young people have to pass people running gangs to get to school. For some it becomes a means of getting some quick money for the things they cannot afford, new trainers, a phone or essential food; gang membership may also give them a sense of belonging. Some find it easier to go along with what is being asked of them, rather than risk the consequences of saying no. With young people moving drugs and money around they are carrying weapons to keep themselves safe. Young people as young as 15 and 16 were described as running drug gangs. Increasingly firearms are involved leaving the community feeling even more unsafe.

One participant described living in Hillfields: *it's a feeling of survival, having to survive every day there*. Another summed it up, *it's just an anxious place with so much anger and stress levels in the area*. She went on to say she believed children were picking up on that without even realising it.

Burglaries are commonplace, though the work of the police in supporting families following these incidents in knowing how to make their properties safe, has been appreciated.

Many individuals also have concerns about safety in relation to the risks of living in high-rise accommodation. As a result of the Grenfell tower disaster, those residents living in the tower blocks are living in fear, residing in buildings that have been the target of arson attacks and which they believe to be unsafe.

The area is very densely populated, and the physical layout of the area is problematic. There are a lot of dark alleyways and tower blocks with stairways that feel unsafe, particularly for young people beginning to find their independence. Street lighting in the area is poor. Individuals congregate and activity and people go under the radar.

One organisation suggested that young women are disproportionately unsafe within the area due to there being historically high levels of sexual exploitation and trafficking in the local space. The transient nature of the area means that it is easy for individuals to 'get lost'. Young women have been particularly targeted because they are more vulnerable to being exploited sexually, either by other young people or organised crime groups.

With Hillfields being such a close-knit community, many families know each other. They know families whose children are involved in gangs or whose children have died through violence. A lot of people will not go out after dark even to the local shops. There is a feeling that violence can happen at any moment, so local people are always living in fear. Young people may not necessarily be involved but they can get caught up in the cross-fire. As a

result, parents can end up feeling that every time their child leaves home, they might not come back.

There is a significant level of trauma in the community which impacts on all, including the very young. Someone working in a school pointed out to one of the providers that *these children have lived way more trauma in their five years than I've lived in my whole life. And they're just used to it. This is just how they live their life.*

3.1.4 Community Assets

I think for a very small area we are very very fortunate; there are so many organisations out there that work within the community, which I think makes Hillfields very special.

Despite the complex challenges within the area, there are many community assets that can be drawn upon. The Community Navigator has developed a comprehensive database of these and is about to publish a directory for dissemination across the community. Unusually, the area has its own local radio station, Hillz FM which provides a valuable opportunity to communicate with individuals living and working in the Hillfields area. The radio station also gives people the opportunity to have a voice via regular phone-ins. A lot of the local community know Hillz FM and are proud of it.

The following organisations were highlighted by participants as being particularly valued. A wide range of support is provided for families by Harmony Hub, including early years support. Staff meet with the family and relevant professionals (midwives, health visitors, schools, police and social workers) to agree interventions. Their advice service 'I'm here to help' gives people the opportunity to call in or ring a freephone number to ask for advice, practical support, food bank and fuel vouchers and various groups are run, including 'Stay and Play', a kids club and a youth group. They have invited a 'Turn around' team to use the hub for weekly sessions, working alongside sex workers who are their service users.

The Refugee and Migrant Centre is an important resource for the many refugees and asylum seekers who move into the area. Diverse faith groups and places of worship have a good reach within their communities and provide valuable support services such as the Hope Centre linked to the Mosaic Church which offers a range of services including groups for young people aged 11-18, support to vulnerable women and a foodbank. Carriers of Hope is a voluntary organisation that helps refugees and asylum seekers who do not have recourse to public funds. They provide food, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes and the opportunity for individuals to socialise. They had the foresight to give out a mobile number and set up a WhatsApp group just before the first lockdown that individuals could use if they needed help. They received more than 2,000 messages.

The WATCH Centre, founded by the community, provides a safe space for young people in the heart of Hillfields. Their aim is to reduce the gap in equalities for people living and working in the area. They work with young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) or at risk of NEET, aiming to improve their skills and supporting them to access employment. Their facilities are also used by other organisations to deliver classes and training. Empowr-U provide a range of support activities including sports for young people,

youth groups and mentoring and Base provide activities in relation to the spoken word and music.

The Positive Youth Foundation has a range of different programmes for young people aged 8-25. Youth Voice undertake consultations with young people, provide training and toolkits for professionals to support them to do consultations, as well as social action and campaigning with young people. They work with newly arrived young people on integration, learning English as a second language as well as learning to live in Coventry. Other programmes include Healthy Futures, promoting health messages; Raising Aspirations covering their NEETS work and Changing Tracks supporting young people to progress into the creative industries. Pa Salieu, who was actually expelled from a local school, described the huge impact of the local youth leaders from the Positive Youth Foundation who changed his life¹⁴.

The local primary and secondary schools are considered by local residents to be of good quality, in relation to standards of education and pastoral care. They know when to refer young people to other services or highlight safeguarding issues. However, one interviewee felt that it is difficult for schools to have the time to bring out young people's skills when they have to spend so much time dealing with behavioural issues.

Many of the thriving local shops, businesses and community organisations are run by individuals (often immigrants) who have lived and worked in the area for many years. They constitute substantial assets of this locality which has been acknowledged by the participants. A local service provider who is also a local resident said:

They're a massive asset because they know the community and they know the needs. As shop owners and people who live here I would say they need to be listened to and spoken to as much as possible, because they have the on-the-ground grassroots experience of being and working here, and also being successful....They are the perfect example of being able to show that you can be successful living in this area, that people say is such a bad place to be.

In addition to providing examples of local people who have been successful, they are a valuable resource in distributing information, for example, about support for those experiencing domestic violence. Visiting a shop may be the only opportunity a woman in an abusive relationship has, to access much-needed information.

The scale and range of organisations highlights the importance of bringing organisations together to work collaboratively, but also the depth of community provision that is available in the area.

3.1.5 The VRU Work in the Area

Coventry has a 10 year-strategy to try and reduce and prevent youth violence across the city. To join up the systems to make this happen, an individual with public health experience

¹⁴ <https://www.coventrytelegraph.net/news/coventry-news/meteoric-rise-pa-salieu-hillfields-19299719>, CoventryLive Naomi de Souza 23rd November 2020

in the City Council was seconded to work with the police as a Youth Violence Prevention Programme Manager, placing the area in a strong position to introduce the VRU pilot in Hillfields.

During Phase One of the pilot, drop-in sessions were held at the WATCH Centre, giving residents the chance to meet with a local radio presenter and share the positives as well as any concerns they had about the area. Working with an organisation called Permission to Smile, a number of outdoor tea parties took place, bringing people together to talk about how people could get to know one another. This was followed by an event arranged in Hillfields Square, with music, poets, artists and free food which lots of local people from different communities attended.

Community Navigators are described by the West Midlands VRU as their ‘people on the ground’ who work with local people to provide enhanced and co-ordinated approaches to violence prevention and reduction. They deliver pilot projects and support violence reduction partnerships to help them succeed¹⁵.

A Community Navigator was appointed in September 2020, on a fixed-term contract until the end of March 2021, initially working four days a week, but then increasing to five. The contract has now been extended until the end of June 2021. The Community Navigator also covers the Wood End impact area. Prior to him starting, discussions had already taken place with strategic partners about the priorities for VRU commissioning. It had been agreed that these would be early years support, school and community-based mentoring and working to reduce domestic abuse. Alongside this, there was an unallocated budget so that the Community Navigator could work with the local community to determine commissioning priorities.

The Community Navigator has focused on co-ordinating the work that is going on locally, bringing partners together where possible, including chairing and facilitating the stakeholder network in Hillfields; commissioning new projects and connecting and providing a bridge between the local community and the VRU, through as many forms of community engagement as possible.

The pilot project is based out of the Harmony Family Hub. The following interventions were commissioned in Phase One: the setting up of an early years support network (the NHS South Warwickshire Foundation Trust); a universal protective behaviours programme (Childhood Counts CIC); mentors in violence prevention training for primary schools (St Giles Trust); development of an inter-faith safe space network through the creation of Places of Peace project; detached youth work and late opening of Harmony Family Hub; increased police activity and visibility to provide community reassurance; creation of a strong counter-narrative to violence in Hillfields, #OurHillfields; parent support groups; community training including first aid and bleed control; community events to bring the area together, including a 10-day peace campaign led by young people from Hillfields¹⁶.

¹⁵ <https://westmidlands-vru.org/supporting-places/>

¹⁶ <https://westmidlands-vru.org/supporting-places/coventry/>

Further services were commissioned in Phase Two including:

- St. Giles Trust delivering training for young people, parents and professionals on a range of topics including gangs and county-lines, knife-crime awareness in primary and secondary schools and providing support and mentoring for young people that are at risk or vulnerable.
- Childhood Counts CIC (Early Years) working with nurseries to teach 3 and 4 year-olds protective behaviours.
- Guiding Young Minds (GYM) provided 12 weeks of outreach work, a youth group for younger children and a survey of the community which led to a range of events taking place including art, music and break-dancing.
- Harmony Hub provided a trauma-based programme for children and families who had been the victims of the fire, supported by a Consultant from the VRU, including children under 5. They are looking at setting up a group for youngsters aged 11+ who are suffering PTSD, as a result of knowledge shared post-Grenfell about the number of young people that suffered PTSD six months afterwards. They have supported the development of a Youth Panel.
- The WATCH Centre was given funding to enable them to provide a safe space for children and families by opening on a Saturday and to support the events that took place in the Square.
- The Positive Youth Foundation delivered the Hillfields Priority Places programme, providing half-term activities, social action campaigning and hot meals where children might not get one at home. They were also funded to deliver youth ambassador training to help young people to understand being safe and feeling safe within the areas where they live. They head up the Coventry Youth Partnership, an umbrella body of community and charity organisations.
- ACEs Awareness and Trauma-informed practice training was provided for staff from the range of organisations involved in the network including the local schools.
- Coventry Haven provided training on domestic violence.

The additional budget also funded the setting up of the Youth Panel and the Community Champions scheme.

3.1.5 Progress towards the VRU Outcomes

Hillfields is the longest running pilot within this evaluation, having been launched in December 2019; it has been the first to lead on a number of initiatives. It has particularly focused on early years support, including the development of universal protective behaviours, an approach which was widely recognised amongst interviewees as being extremely valuable, though it is difficult to assess the impact and outcomes, as they will not be evident until years to come. However, this work was recognised to have contributed to the development of a more trauma-responsive community, along with the training that has taken place in relation to ACEs awareness and trauma-informed practice. The pilot has also focused on the development of engaged, compassionate, resilient communities and has been particularly successful in trying to develop a counter-narrative. From observations it appeared that the stakeholder network had a common vision and shared objectives. There was a real focus on getting the views of local residents and engaging them, for example as

community champions and embedding the work of the VRU in the community to ensure sustainability. It also appears to be improving the ways that organisations work together. A participant at the end of a stakeholder meeting put in the chat box: *I always leave basking in the glow of shared commitment to helping in our community.*

Progress in relation to the key aspects of the pilot project is detailed below:

The VRU Approach

Through the different components of the pilot, progress has been made towards developing a collaborative, whole system approach with a clear focus on public health approaches; supporting an engaged, compassionate and resilient community and taking a shared approach that nurturing children at every age is appropriate. Through the development of primary, secondary and tertiary preventative interventions the pilot has sought to develop a place-based approach that mitigates the risk factors that make violence more likely and increase protective behaviours. The pilot has raised awareness of a public health, trauma-informed approach and the work of the VRU.

The Stakeholder Network

Significant progress has been made in a short space of time particularly in relation to communication, co-ordination and collaboration. The presence of the Community Navigator, who prior to appointment had worked on a VRU-funded project and consequently already had an excellent understanding of the work and links with the relevant organisations, has helped to develop an effective network from what had previously been a more informal group. Hillfields was the first pilot to develop comprehensive terms of reference and this template is now being used across pilots in the West Midlands. Made up of approximately 35 organisations with meeting details being sent to more than 50 separate email addresses, 14-16 attend on a regular basis. Initially meeting fortnightly and now monthly, it brings together a range of providers and key stakeholders. Attendees include representatives from local community and faith organisations, nurseries, the police, the local radio station and support providers. The network has aided multi-agency working and collaboration, establishing links between providers and services and creating what one provider described as *a team around the family, a big, wrap-around blanket of support*. Being more aware of the services on offer, supports signposting and referral as emphasised by one of our interviewees:

It's a team that goes in one direction and people know, the community know who to go to and what services to go to, that they are qualified in and have the professional knowledge to help them at the time.

Organisations are coming together to provide support following major incidents. Following the arson attack on a tower block, a sub-group from the network was established which met regularly to discuss the response and how best to help all those affected including distributing food, clothes and toys. The Housing Association, for example, connected services with people who needed help; Childhood Counts CIC worked with children of affected families; the Police did home visits; the Family Hub provided services to families and the WATCH Centre provided storage space. This might not have been possible had the network not been in existence and relationships already established. However, there were

mixed views as to how successful these efforts have been. Whilst some residents and organisations were very positive about the joint support that had been provided, some organisations felt that more could be done to ensure effective co-ordination for families suffering trauma.

Another example of the network working together, was the domestic violence campaign run at Christmas, raising awareness of where people could turn for support.

The Ten Days of Peace Campaign was held for the first time in March last year and was held again in March this year. This campaign, which is led by the VRU, brings together young people, communities and partner organisations from the education sector, to celebrate the community's efforts towards safeguarding children and young people as well as to act as a catalyst for further work and activity aimed at reducing violence¹⁷. There are different planning streams - youth, schools and communities, each contributing to the content and organisation of the campaign.

Members have been given the opportunity at meetings to share their thoughts on any serious incidents that have taken place in the area as well as what they've encountered and observed. The meetings have also provided opportunities to share ways of managing and coping with all the challenges presented by Covid, as well as how to prepare for coming out of lockdown.

One member of the group felt that the size made it a bit unwieldy, with little scope or time to do anything other than share information and encourage referrals to the member organisations and suggested that it would be helpful if more actual data could be shared at meetings, so providers can understand the level of reach and what appears to be working and not working in engaging youngsters and families, as well as case studies to demonstrate impact.

Commissioning Processes

The VRU commissioning has enabled the enhancement of existing activity and the introduction of specialist provision into the area. Although significant work has taken place in relation to violence reduction, concerns were expressed by some providers about the lack of involvement of local residents in the planning of projects and the 'rushed' timescales to develop and submit applications for funding:

It was all very much the cart before the horse. And it all felt so rushed and the timeline was so rushed; we have this money and we need to spend it by March. And that was the same with the first phase and the second phase. Don't get me wrong, it is great that we have actually got something happening in Hillfields, but I just feel again it is this type of, we either have the money and use it but it doesn't always get spent on the right things and it isn't always the community, and I go back to the whole thing of giving the power to the community, it is other people that are making the decisions on how the money is spent and where it is spent.

¹⁷ <https://coventrycityofpeace.uk/10-days-of-peace-campaign/>

Hillfields was described by one interviewee as ‘the test crash dummy’. Pots of money had been distributed but organisations had been told what they needed to do with these funds, for example, to open for more hours, without any shared discussion about the best way of meeting outcomes. It was felt that it would have been better if the local community could have been asked what they wanted then local community groups and organisations could have worked up their own ideas, costed them and then submitted them for consideration. There were also concerns about the limited timeframes in which to deliver and demonstrate impact as well as become sustainable.

Interventions

The Pilot has taken a whole life course approach in relation to preventing and reducing violence; co-producing and co-ordinating primary, secondary and tertiary preventative interventions with the aim of developing a whole-system, place-based approach that mitigates the complex risk factors that make violence more likely and increases protective factors. The focus has been on undertaking specialist work and developing the awareness and skills of parents and staff within the area, recognising that developing individuals’ resilience and protective behaviours is a process that needs to start at the earliest opportunity. One of the interviewees pointed out: *So I think at the moment the majority of the money from central Government seems to be very much focussed on what we call tertiary prevention, which is the bit where they have already entered the criminal justice system or they’ve already become entrenched in gang life, and what we’re really fighting hard to do in Coventry is to move the money over to the early prevention because we think over the longer term of our strategy that will yield more success than just fire fighting at the top end.*

A specialist worker from outside of the area has been commissioned to work in 4 local nursery schools, working with 3-4 year olds, to understand what it means to feel safe. This expert practitioner has also talked to children about knife crime and drugs in an age-appropriate way. During the first 10 weeks this individual flagged approximately 35 safeguarding concerns. It seemed that given the opportunity, when they are feeling in a safe space, very young children will disclose a lot of information, with the majority of concerns being in relation to domestic abuse. As a result of this training, nursery and school staff who previously knew nothing about protective behaviours work are now trained in this approach. Supporting the early help team and anti-natal and health visiting teams was also a key part of this approach as they work with families and can spot early warning signs that no other agency would spot. Only time will tell how effective these approaches are as this is long-term preventative work, but they are perceived by local providers and stakeholders as being critical in enabling children to develop the skills to keep themselves safe.

In addition, there is recognition that there is a need to look at prevention in primary school, particularly as young people transition from year 6 to year 7. Youngsters are moving from a familiar environment to one where they are exposed to much older children, negative influences, a different physical space and a different journey to and from school. St Giles Trust has been commissioned to deliver a programme SOS+, informing young people about the dangers they face and helping them to build resilience. The aim is to deliver early intervention in educational and community settings. The organisation’s programmes have all been developed by ex-offenders. The people that work for them have lived experience of

the criminal justice system with the aim of de-glamourising gang involvement and exposing the harsh realities of crime and violence. They are sometimes recruited by St Giles while they are still serving prison sentences, trained intensively to mentor young people and then, on their release, given a job with St Giles. There was a shared view amongst participants that lived experience can be a very powerful tool, enabling mentors to have a voice with young people who may be unwilling to talk to other professionals. Their workshops on gangs and county lines outline the methods used to groom, recruit and exploit young people and the push and pull factors, risks and consequences of county line involvement as well as the signs and indicators for parents to look out for.

As well as being valued by providers for their ability to get key messages across to young people, St. Giles are also reaching parents who may not otherwise engage. In one of their awareness-raising sessions on gangs and county lines, two individuals were present who revealed that they had been in gangs (one a member of a group that travelled to football matches aiming to engage in violence and one a member of a bikers' group). They had both been in gangs that carried weapons and shared their own experiences of feeling a sense of 'belonging'. Both indicated that they attended the workshop because they were aware of the background of the trainer, so felt that they could learn from his experiences.

St Giles have four different programmes running in the area. The VRU funds the SOS Plus project, but the pilot has benefited from the other projects that are funded by the National Lottery and the Home Office including having a case worker at the local hospital, responding to incidents when a young person is admitted with a knife wound which is then considered to be a 'teachable moment'.

GYM (Guiding Young Minds) is also run by an ex-gang member. The service provides confidential support for children involved in violence, those that have been excluded from school and young people that are at risk of being groomed into gangs, aiming to keep them safe. With a team of mentors, therapists and outreach workers they have a bus that goes out into the community where the issues are actually happening, spending time in Hillfields Square and parking up close to schools when they finish. Young people pass on their way home or to the shops and the youth workers are able to develop relationships and deliver support. Residents and providers expressed how much they valued the work of the organisation. Interestingly it was fed back that some gang members had sent young people to GYM because they did not necessarily want them to follow the route that they had taken into gangs.

The organisation aims to provide positive role-models within the local community, recognising that the local gangs would not hesitate to step in and become 'mentors' of young people, providing the recognition and financial opportunities that they are looking for. They provide a 24/7 helpline recognising that families can need advice and support at any time. The organisation was only funded for a short-term piece of work in the area. Despite this it appeared that they were able to quickly develop effective relationships with disengaged young people. During lockdown they continued to take their van out onto the streets, reaching out to those young people that were ignoring the regulations. For those that were remaining at home, they produced videos, with role plays using language appropriate for the target audience, focusing on their key messages in relation to the

dangers of gang membership and criminal exploitation. These were put out each week on YouTube with tips on trauma from a specialist therapist. Young people shared these with their friends, with each of the films being viewed up to 4,000 times, enabling the organisation to reach thousands of young people on a weekly basis.

The Positive Youth Foundation (PYF) has provided half-term and after-school programmes including arts, music and sport at a community centre providing a safe place for young people, as well as one-to-one support where needed. They have developed Youth Ambassadors who have undertaken social action campaigns and training has been provided on topics such as emergency first-aid. In addition to mentoring, Empowr-U has developed youth forums with the aim of encouraging young people to work in their local communities.

There are aspects that have been less successful, due to the challenges posed by Covid and the need to transfer services online, resulting in fewer young people receiving services. Similarly, the numbers signing up for training and being recruited as community champions have been impacted. It has not been possible to hold the football tournament that the Youth Forum had planned on the theme of bringing different communities together and talking about safety and the reduction of violence. The Early Years Provider network has not been established, although providers are connected.

Community Engagement

Participants felt that efforts had been made to find out what the community actually wants rather than prescribing solutions and recognised the energy that has gone into creating positive relationships. One interviewee spoke of *galvanising the community*. The Community Navigator has sought to use different forms of community engagement to get as many views as possible into the VRU's work. By introducing a Youth Panel, reaching out to the local community via questionnaires and being part of community events the VRU has managed to seek the views of local people and is also helping to change the narrative. The Youth Panel has made a number of suggestions including the running of a football tournament, giving young people something positive to focus on. The Panel has also been involved in helping to decide what the VRU monies should be spent on. However, keeping the Youth Panel going through lockdown has been problematic.

Questionnaires have been distributed by the Community Navigator to local residents via local providers, to get people's views on violence and safety in the area and to get their thoughts on what is needed. The 45 responses received are currently being analysed.

The Community Champions scheme is trying to engage not just residents, but also people who work, study and use services in Hillfields regularly, to give them an understanding about what is available in the area, what some of the challenges are and how they can join in, encouraging neighbours and friends to care for their area and take responsibility for others. The volunteer champions will be supported to undertake relevant qualifications. It is an important scheme as it recognises the role that everybody in the community can play in violence prevention and reduction.

Given the diversity of the community in Hillfields, there has been a particular focus on considering how to be more accessible and inclusive, including reaching out to organisations that work with refugees and asylum seekers.

Local residents told us they were keen to work with local organisations to improve the area. *I want to make the area better. We want to make a difference. I think if they have women and they have a place, they have a lot of ideas maybe to improve; they need this place to come and give their ideas to somebody who will listen.*

Residents felt that there are strong links between women of all ethnic groups in the area and that it would help if women could be given free spaces where they could come together to talk, eat and do crafts. It was suggested that registered social landlords could make available rooms in their tower blocks where the women in particular, can get together to socialise, provide mutual support, share information and any concerns and attempt to identify solutions to community issues.

Working with Stakeholders

In addition to the VRU commissioned work in the area, the VRU has worked closely with providers and stakeholders, including the police to take forward the overall objectives. The police have arranged a number of community events in Hillfields Square for local residents with entertainment, food and a free clothes store as well as open-air cinema sessions. These have been well received, providing engagement opportunities and a chance for local residents to reclaim the Square, though it was suggested that it might be preferable to limit the police presence at such events and that using plain-clothes officers might be more appropriate. The Safer Streets Fund has enabled the painting of some children's games on the Square, based on research that has shown that if there are things in a space that appeal to children, individuals are less likely to conduct criminal activity. The police are just about to use Safer Streets funding to run a social media campaign to promote Fearless, a site where young people can access advice about crime and criminality and give information anonymously about crime, in a similar way to Crime Stoppers. The hope is that this will help to break down the culture of non-reporting.

Talks have been given by the VRU to individuals supported by Carriers of Hope to help mothers understand about 'risky behaviour'. The Community Navigator had made arrangements prior to Covid for the police to visit on a weekly basis to give information to the women supported by the organisation and answer any questions.

Targeted and open access support has been provided by local providers, working with large groups of young people as well as on a one-to-one basis supporting the most vulnerable young people and their families. A number of providers including the Positive Youth Foundation, the WATCH Centre and Hillz FM provide support out of school hours. Providers have worked together to try to timetable activities across the week so young people can fill their time and have reached out to schools to promote what they offer, as well advertising in local parks and direct approaches to young people on the streets. However, it was still felt that there is a lack of safe spaces and things to do for young people and the spaces that do exist are under-utilised.

Training

A wide range of training has been funded and or co-ordinated by the VRU with staff in the area being able to access ACEs Awareness, Trauma-informed practice and domestic violence awareness training.

The ACEs training, which was provided by Barnardo's, aims to develop knowledge & understanding of:

- ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences)
- The potential impact of ACEs & trauma across the life-course
- The role of resilience
- The need for trauma-informed practice approaches

As well as covering the theory and growing evidence base behind ACEs, the impact and prevalence, resilience and risk and protective factors, the training also introduces a trauma-informed approach and the key principles behind becoming a trauma-informed organisation, prompting participants to think about changes they could make to their practice and that of their organisation.

One interviewee described her concern and surprise that she had come across people working with children and young people who were not aware of ACEs, something which she described as *baseline*.

By developing awareness and understanding of the impact of trauma and ways of responding as well as the confidence of those working with children, young people and families, this should develop more appropriate responses, increased support and the embedding of trauma-informed approaches.

ACEs training in Hillfields has been delivered to 42 individuals from 7 organisations including the police and voluntary sector providers. Trainees were asked how many individuals they support in an average week and the cumulative figure for the area was 243.

Trauma-informed Practice training has also taken place in the area, however, the data in relation to this has not yet been processed.

Participants of this evaluation felt that the ACEs and the Trauma-informed Practice training has been very positive and will help to change the culture within their organisations.

In addition to the VRU funded programmes, organisations have opened up their own training programmes to staff and parents supported by other organisations, helping to significantly extend the training offer.

Developing a Counter-narrative

The Community Navigator and providers have tried to promote the work they are doing and change the narrative, addressing the misconceptions held about Hillfields from outside of the area and providing a counter-narrative, emphasising the positives. The Positive Youth Foundation consulted with young people, local residents and local business owners about

what Hillfields means to them. They wanted people to feel that Hillfields was their space and raise awareness of the services that are being provided in the area. They did a door-drop to approximately 5,000 premises of a booklet detailing the VRU services in the area and explaining how people could get in touch. It has been appreciated by local providers as efforts need to be made to reach out to vulnerable residents: *Vulnerable people are so busy being vulnerable and destitute...and frightened and they haven't got the energy to be thinking I need to get some help. It's got to be reached out to them.*

Changing the narrative has included building relationships between the police and the local community and making sure that residents understand the role that the police have. The hashtag of the campaign #OurHillfields is being used by partners to promote the work they are doing. The campaign was due to lead up to a showcase event that would celebrate the work of the pilot. Unfortunately, this could not take place because of Covid, meaning that much of the work of the VRU has gone unnoticed by local people. However, the work within the area has been promoted in #OurHillfields Short Film¹⁸ which was commissioned by the VRU and produced by the Positive Youth Foundation. It celebrates the contributions of local partners and young people to the place-based pilot in Hillfields.

The pilot has succeeded in developing and co-ordinating a menu/chain of provision in relation to the prevention and reduction of youth violence that is available from early years through to adulthood, ensuring that there are services available at each stage of a young person's journey. The lessons learnt from Hillfields are already influencing the development of violence reduction services within the neighbouring area of Wood End including the importance of community engagement from the very start, as well as in other pilots in the West Midlands. This demonstrates the diffusion of benefits' effect when crime prevention efforts and solutions in one location have a positive impact on other locations (Lab 2010). The Hillfields pilot has been held up as an example of good practice resulting in a virtual visit by the Permanent Secretary from the Home Office and the Policing Minister.

3.2 Three Estates, Kings Norton

3.2.1 Evaluation Process in the Pilot Area

11 interviews have been undertaken with the police, community safety, a housing provider, providers of support for young people, local residents and the Community Navigator. Observations have taken place of seven steering group meetings, one ACEs Awareness and one Trauma-Informed Practice training (attended by a number of local stakeholders including providers, community safety, youth services, the police and faith organisations) and a residents' meeting.

3.2.2 Perceptions of the Area

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiIRJdxMc5o>

The Three Estates (Hawkesley, Pool Farm and Primrose Hill) in Kings Norton is one of the most deprived parts of Birmingham, as highlighted in the West Midlands VRU Strategic Needs Assessment (WM VRU 2021). It is a young population with 28% of its residents under the age of 18. The Three Estates is one of the most deprived parts of the country for the children growing up there¹⁹. According to research published by the End Child Poverty (ECP) coalition 37% of children living in the Birmingham Northfield constituency which includes the Three Estates are living in poverty, almost 9,000 children²⁰. In terms of the West Midlands VRU risk index Hawkesley that corresponds most closely to Three Estates ranks 6th out of 132 neighbourhoods in Birmingham and 14th out of 356 in the West Midlands (WM VRU 2021). It ranks 6th in income deprivation affecting children, out of 356 neighbourhoods in the West Midlands and it is the second-highest ranking neighbourhood in the West Midlands for mental health issues.

School provides an additional protective factor for young people already at risk of being involved in violence, however, the permanent school exclusion rate in state-funded secondary schools in and around Three Estates is high in comparison to the rest of Birmingham and the national picture. All the state-funded secondary schools, apart from Turves Green Girls School, have 3-year average permanent exclusion rates that are more than double the Birmingham average. Permanent exclusion, for some young people, may represent the removal of one of the last protections against exploitation, criminality and violence.

Whilst Birmingham is a diverse multi-cultural city, Kings Norton South is 83% White British. The area is known collectively as the Three Estates but a resident told us, *there are territorial differences between the three estates and historically people have never really wanted to cross over* resulting in the area feeling disconnected. Grouping it together, rather than viewing it as three separate estates was considered by some local people to be adding to the stigmatisation of the area and reinforcing its *negative branding*.

The area was described by the interviewed stakeholders as placing a great demand on public services including the police, fire, ambulance, council and other partners, and experiencing high rates of deprivation, crime and anti-social behaviour. One person described the locality as a place where you constantly see police cars and ambulances on the streets.

Hawkesley was the newest of the three estates built in the 1970s and consists largely of high and low rise council housing. Pool Farm was built in the 1960s and has more flats and maisonettes. Most of the Primrose Hill estate has been knocked down now, more tower blocks are awaiting demolition and new housing is currently in development. There is a mix of owner-occupied properties and social housing, with a difference in the quality of the housing reinforcing many of the divisions. A lot of new people are moving into the area but the comment was made that you do not see these newcomers and there does not seem to be any connection with the local community.

¹⁹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates>

²⁰ <https://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty-in-your-area-201415-20819>

With only a few families having gardens, local residents have been particularly restricted during the lockdowns. Concerns were raised about the longstanding damage to individuals' mental health. Because of its deprivation as well as its housing stock, families are moving away from or being accepted into the area, under the process called 'Tier 1 housing moves'. These are relocations by council or housing providers of problematic families from one area to another which can impact on the local community. Participants described how a lot of families with issues live in quite a small area and have a disproportionate impact on the people living in the area.

The number of organisations and agencies working on the estate has reduced and those services that have been going in have not been well co-ordinated. Stakeholders described a lack of infrastructure and the difficulties of getting providers to see beyond their part of the delivery model.

Many local residents have lived there for the whole of their lives, resulting in multi-generations living within close proximity and most people knowing each other. The area was described as being very insular, with life very much revolving around the immediate locality. People tend to remain on the Three Estates, not even venturing into the City. This insularity can also feed into intolerance and racism that can play out for the small number of BAME communities on occasions with, for example, posters and far right materials, fixed to lamp posts. The Brexit Party and UKIP together attracted 4.4% of the vote in the Northfield constituency (which incorporates Three Estates) in 2019, more than twice the figure for the UK²¹.

We were presented with a picture of an area of significant and complex deprivation with high levels of unemployment and a lack of opportunities and activities for young people. A lot of residents, including young people, feel that they have been continually let down and abandoned, resulting in a lack of engagement with agencies that come into the area and in community events. It has been believed that organisations 'parachute in and then leave'. When good services have been in place, budget cuts have led to their closure. The lack of positive activity and the fact that a lot of kids are just left to their own devices creates problems.

There has been a lack of investment in the area and with many people without jobs, people described there as not being much *to get out of bed for*. There can be skills gaps and a lack of educational achievement amongst adults and young people. Local young people were described by providers of youth services as tending to have very low aspirations in terms of education. Some struggle to get through mainstream school and despite Cadbury College being nearby, young people do not consider this to be an option for them. Many referred to a sense of *hopelessness* and feeling that there are few pathways open to them.

One stakeholder described how this feeds into other problems, including domestic abuse, alcohol and substance misuse, violence and disenfranchised young people getting drawn in to criminal activity. One experienced children's organisation described how 'sweary' and

²¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/politics/constituencies/E14000565>

how rough with each other the children are. Food had to be provided because youngsters do not bring snacks with them even when these have been requested.

Historically, there has been a lack of trust between statutory services, the police, councillors and the community and this has had a profound impact. Interviewees described how families pass down negative attitudes, towards the police in particular. Organisations stressed the importance of getting embedded in the community and building up a reputation, so they can gain people's trust, with third sector organisations being key to this.

Three Estates was described as quite a green place in comparison with inner-city areas, but individuals reported a lack of a sense of community. Shops are boarded up and there is no central hub for social interaction. There has been some regeneration in the last 18-20 months which has made a slight improvement to how the area looks, but it is a long way off completion and some parts need significant investment. The area has suffered from austerity over the last decade impacting on policing and the closing down of services particularly the youth service. There used to be a youth centre in the middle of Hawkesley with eight full-time youth workers. The centre closed and there are now only three part-time workers. The area has also been affected by the move away from more traditional community development work. One resident said: *The area's very rundown...It's just not a very pleasant area to grow up in, and that alone is a battle in itself, to get out of the house, to do anything, because there's nothing to do round here. There's no flower gardens; there's no nice parks.There's just nothing, nothing at all for them to do..... The shops are very rundown, the area's very rundown, there's no local work, there's no local health, there's no local mentors, there's no community spirit. So, I think everyone just sort of feels a bit low.*

However, some local residents did talk about a sense of neighbourliness with people looking out for each other. A provider organisation had asked a set of questions of local people including what are the positive things and what do you like about your community? They fed back that:

A lot of people and generally the thing that was mentioned most was that sense of neighbourliness and community and quite friendly. So, I wonder maybe what can be doneto build on that? And the fact that there is that sort of culture and even though there is all this other stuff going on, there is a view that is a huge strength and it's a huge gift for a community to have when people are like that and to build on that and to have a sense that people can look out more for each other.

Concerns were raised about an absence of civic life/civic society in the area, with no neighbourhood and community forums and little interest shown in the Three Estates by local representatives resulting in the residents not having a collective voice:

A lot of areas might have a ...forum, where you know, there are meetings, people come together, they voice concerns to the Council or to the police. There's nothing like that in the Three Estates....But I think what is needed is like a neighbourhood forum...a collective voice that has clout and strength, basically shout out about what are the issues because some of the stuff that's going on is, it is quite scandalous really. The fact that it is ongoing and people have to live day in, day out with it..., so yes, maybe that is the key thing, to have a collective

voice...combined with that strength that there is in terms of people looking out for each other, I think that could be quite a positive thing.

3.2.3 Perceptions of Violence and Safety

Stakeholders talked of lots of complaints from local people about feeling unsafe and this was confirmed by local people speaking at a residents' meeting arranged by the VRU with other stakeholders. There were major concerns about the number of burglaries, with a number of people feeling that their Council-owned homes did not have the necessary security features. Action had been taken to cut down bushes and improve street lighting to help people feel safer, but their concerns are confirmed by the statistics. The Three Estates experiences higher rates of violent crime, possession of weapon offences and anti-social behaviour than the West Midlands and England in general. "The 12-month total of incidents of violent crime recorded by police in the Three Estates is 64 per 1,000 residents. The average in England is 29. The average number of the possession of weapon offences in the Three Estates is 2½ times higher than the national average" (WM VRU 2021).

One resident we spoke to described burglaries as being *at an epidemic level* and a number reported that they increased significantly during lockdown. They were also particularly concerned about the level of knife-crime, street robberies and drug dealing as well as anti-social behaviour. A relatively small group of young people are thought to be responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime on the estate, including a group of 13-14 year-olds who are thought to have carried out many of the recent burglaries. The providers described how young people are disconnected from their community so are willing to engage in muggings and burglaries of their neighbours. It was thought that some crime goes unreported because crime is normalised in the area. However, concerns were also raised at the residents' meeting about how many incidents were reported using the phone number 101, which the local police said were not being passed on to them.

There is a significant amount of youth-on-youth violence and a sense that young people resort to violence very quickly. One provider described young people in the area as *fearless* even though it is them that are mainly impacted.

Details of crimes, including misinformation and CCTV coverage are being widely shared on social media, particularly on the B38 Facebook group. This is heightening anxieties and breeding a feeling of being unsafe. There is also the danger when perpetrators are identified, that local people could take matters into their own hands. Residents have said that significant threats have been made against some young people on the Estates. In addition, the fear of crime can affect people's perceptions with, for example, groups of young people, making them feel uneasy.

As already stated we were told that people in the area have a negative perception of the police, with young people in particular being wary of interacting with them. As a consequence, the police are working with other partners to try and develop a more positive relationship. Some people feel that the police are either ineffective or inactive and that there isn't enough of a police presence. Police numbers were hit by austerity, but policing delivery has recently uplifted within this impact area and new ways of engaging with the

public are being tried, including digital means. Attempts are being made to roll out WM Now, a two-way messaging system for the public, across Kings Norton. The Police have introduced 'Week 13' when three days are ring-fenced to focus on Kings Norton and partnership working. They go door-to-door with partners to engage families and young people. This has been received very positively. In addition, intervention and prevention at an early stage has been prioritised with the School and Young Person Link Officer doing extensive work in both the primary and secondary schools, to develop positive relationships.

The environment is described as a crowded space with unsafe rat-runs. The layout includes a number of tunnels and alleyways making it easy for perpetrators of crimes to move around the estate, whilst local people walk the long way round to take their kids to school to avoid using these. There are particular hotspots for anti-social behaviour including certain shops, fast-food outlets and outside schools. Young people congregate because there is the prevailing feeling that there is little for them to do. There have been incidents when youngsters from different schools have targeted each other, with individuals being in possession of knives. Parents worry about their kids going out and what they might be drawn into.

Providers talked about the gang culture and crime on Three Estates being very family orientated and centred on 3-4 families, with 2nd and 3rd generations of gang members, whose younger siblings and sons and daughters are now engaging in the same criminal activities. One stakeholder related having asked a child what would stop him doing these things; his response was *Nothing, it is how it is.*

There is not one ruling gang, so localised inter-gang conflicts are less evident. However, younger boys are doing county lines and there have been some serious stabbings. One mother described how she and her 7 year-old son on the way home from school, heard gun shots while at the local shop. She also described more than three years of harassment, racial abuse and violence from her next-door-neighbour, before the authorities went down the eviction route:

What is the point of having people, police there, do you know what I mean, if they're not in a position to protect people from danger or safeguard us, and actually my mental health is deteriorating in the process. What is the point of having all these services there to contact, if actually they're not going to do anything?

3.2.4 Community Assets

The following services were highlighted by participants as key resources in the area. InUnity provide a range of different services including a youth club at Hawkesley Community Centre, sports activities, craft activities, mentoring on a one-to-one basis and a transition programme for youngsters going into year 7. The Youth Service provides detached youth workers; Open House supports the wellbeing of families and provides arts and crafts activities and Sport Birmingham provides a range of sports activities, education and training. Spring to Life provide a wide variety of wellbeing and mental health programmes including talking therapies (counselling), body-based therapies (dance, mindfulness and massage), creative therapies (art, drumming and creative writing) and eco-therapies (including

community gardening and support to garden at home). These include one-to-one sessions, counselling, group work and community-based activities. They have been working in the area for two years with the aim of delivering a long-term sustained wellbeing programme in the area. They are involving local people in the process as much as possible, including recruiting local residents.

Permission to Smile came in from outside of the area, putting up banners encouraging individuals to smile and say hello to each other. They arranged street tea parties to bring the community together. Southgate Church is recognised as a key provider of activities for young people involved in crime and drugs, providing music and sports sessions.

Hawkesley Community Centre is run by Age Concern but provides a community hub that is available to everyone in the local community, including a community cafe which will open post-lockdown. The police hold drop-in sessions at the centre where local residents can have 'Coffee with the Copper'. The police are keen to develop a place that people can just walk into, rather than having to be there for a specific purpose. During the pandemic the Centre has provided much-needed emergency support, funded by the Police and Crime Commissioner's Prevention Fund, delivering hot meals weekly to vulnerable people in the community. The Centre has also received funding previously through the Active Citizens Fund, enabling them to run weekly football sessions for youngsters with Birmingham City football club. Young people had to attend an awareness-raising session on knife crime prior to attending these.

The Aston Villa Foundation also uses sport and their brand to divert youngsters from negative influences towards positive pathways. Their staff are trained as sports coaches, youth workers and mentors. They use sport to engage young people, running sessions where youngsters play football, table-tennis, basketball and boxing, then the staff follow these with conversations. With having one of the biggest brands in the city they are able to engage with youngsters who might not participate in sessions run by other providers. However, there is limited sports provision in the area and a lack of safe spaces. The only indoor facilities are within the schools.

Like Spring to Life, the Aston Villa Foundation often recruits from the area, so that staff can draw on their own first-hand experience of what it is like growing up in the area and act as a role model to individuals from their neighbourhood.

Birmingham Youth Service provide a youth club and a girls' group session on the Three Estates; they have run holiday schemes and they have done awareness raising in relation to knife crime, county lines, domestic violence and work around positive relationships.

The B38 Facebook group is viewed as a great resource for bringing local people together and giving people a voice. A vulnerable individual, known to a number of local organisations, posted a message just saying 'Help me' and received a huge amount of support. Advice is being shared about topics such as how to secure your property, so people feel that there is a sense of the community trying to help itself, but it was also recognised that this needs very careful management. The VRU have offered assistance with this.

3.2.5 The VRU Work in the Area

The Community Navigator was appointed in September 2020 working full-time, though she has also been covering other parts of East and South Birmingham. The post was a short-term contract up until the end of March which has now been extended until the end of June. The main focus has been on increasing resilience and community cohesion. Partners are working together to:

- Develop an effective placed-based stakeholder network that maximises resources in the area; deliver additional specialist youth provision and parent peer support; offer therapeutic intervention to young people.
- Offer targeted support (therapeutic or mentoring) to young people at risk, deliver trauma-informed practice training and deliver specialist employability support to young people.

The VRU has funded a number of providers to deliver youth engagement services and parent support services in the area. These include Birmingham City Council's Youth service, Sport Birmingham including its youth arm MAD, Spring to Life, InUnity, Pathfinder (Birmingham Children's Trust) and the Aston Villa Foundation.

InUnity were commissioned to run a Resilience programme in three schools, giving young girls a sense of identity with the aim of making them less vulnerable to getting involved in crime. Spring to Life undertook a personalised needs assessment for Three Estates. They had originally been funded to deliver a 10-week ACEs recovery toolkit but changed this to providing ACEs and trauma-informed practice training online. Sport Birmingham were commissioned to provide 'Roots to Success', an employment support service but this has been delayed until March this year because of difficulties with establishing and delivering it during lockdown. As an alternative they have been providing support and training for other providers in relation to employment. The Aston Villa Foundation has been funded to work in schools, provide outreach sessions and detached youth work. The funding has also been used to extend the provision of the youth service in the area including one-to-one work and support for families. Pathfinder (part of Birmingham Children's Trust) were funded to provide parent support looking at co-producing solutions to address the issues on Three Estates.

3.2.6 Progress towards the VRU Outcomes

The pilot is still relatively new and has faced the difficulty of trying to get up-and-running during a period of lockdown. Despite this a significant amount has been achieved in a short space of time. Prior to the establishment of the stakeholder network, it appeared that organisations in the area were disconnected and not working in partnership. The Community Navigator has succeeded in setting up a group that is working effectively together in identifying the needs of the area and trying to fill the gaps. They are establishing more youth services providing more opportunities for young people to engage in positive activities, with targeted access for mentoring and support for those most at risk.

A programme of training in relation to ACEs Awareness and Trauma-informed practice has been implemented and offered to all the partner organisations. Working in conjunction with the Police Schools and Young People's Link Officer, who has positive relationships with the

local schools, the Community Navigator encouraged the local secondary school ARK Academy to introduce ACEs awareness and trauma-informed practices training and subsequently all their staff (including non-teaching staff) are being trained. They are pledging to be a Trauma Informed School.

The Community Navigator has led discussions on the re-opening of Greaves Hall, which used to be a community hub, as a multi-stakeholder managed community resource which is seen by local families as a potentially very valuable safe space. If achieved, this would be a significant legacy of the pilot, demonstrating the strength of local people and community organisations working together. Local people have been involved at every stage of the discussions and will be essential in taking the project forward in a volunteering capacity, if the building does become a community resource. This could have a considerable positive impact on the locality in contrast to its previous role which was described as *the epicentre of a lot of our difficulties. It would provide a huge focal point drawing out some of those families and hopefully increasing community cohesion providing a focal point for young people, positive activity for young people.*

Progress in relation to the key aspects of the pilot project is detailed below:

The VRU Approach

There has been a focus on developing a more resilient community, with commissioning focused on grass-roots organisations and organisations that aim to employ people from Three Estates. The network is developing a collaborative, whole system approach with a clear focus on public health approaches.

The Stakeholder Network

The Community Navigator has grown an effective stakeholder network, working to agreed terms of reference, that meets fortnightly, bringing together local stakeholders who share the common goals of reducing and preventing vulnerability and violence; increasing protective factors; improving life chances; working inclusively and enabling communities and individuals to develop. There are 30 organisations in the network and on average approximately 12 people attend each meeting. The Community Navigator plays a role of 'go to' person, and has in a very short space of time, become what was described as *the glue* locally, drawing all the partners together and helping to create a joined-up and cohesive picture. As one stakeholder said about having a Community Navigator:

I think moving forward it's going to be really beneficial for the community. It has been a crucial role. The Community Navigator has brought in the wider themes of the VRU, for example a call for action in relation to domestic abuse. There isn't a specific operational partner within the pilot but there is still a recognition that the current partners may be engaging with families that are experiencing domestic abuse....So that connectivity and connecting the wider strategic dots is starting to happen well now through that role.

Another stakeholder described how the Community Navigator has helped providers to see past their delivery model and see the wider piece, sharing information and being less protective about their patch, encouraging them to consider whether their model operational delivery was the right one and to adapt if necessary.

There was widespread recognition that the network has brought the key players to the table, though it was surprising that Hawkesley Community Centre were not involved from the start, particularly as they had held VRU related events at the centre including Week 13 events run by the police and organised by the Youth Service.

The network has enabled an increased menu of youth engagement opportunities to be provided. In addition, it has made referral to services easier with members having a better understanding of the support on offer and the referral processes. Providers have worked together to develop a timetable across organisations, so activities do not conflict resulting in more things for young people to do. Providers flag individuals that they are concerned about and discuss strategies to support them. It was described as *real solution-focused partnership working*.

Commissioning Processes

Concerns were raised about the fact that the funding came in late in both years and services had to be delivered within very short timescales. However the new funding was well received by all stakeholders:

It's brought extra resources into the Estates which is very much welcomed in whatever form that is. Any additional resource is massive for an area like the Estates. There's been comments previously about being the forgotten estate...Having those extra resources in whatever shape or form they come has just been huge for the estate.

Interventions

The VRU focus has been on tapping into local assets, resources and projects and supporting grassroots organisations and a bottom-up approach which should make the services more sustainable going forward. One of these providers stressed the importance of employing local people who *speak the language* and who people can relate to. It was felt that there are huge advantages in having staff that local people bump into on a daily basis, a base of people who can be a foundation for the service and individuals who will know which young people in their area are at risk of exploitation. They were clear that every community will have local people who are passionate about their area and who want to make a difference. They will already have the connections so it is just about giving them the resources. The afore mentioned organisation has recruited local staff by just going to local places such as the community centre and places of worship and talking to people. Individuals that have used services have also gone on to work for them. When they work with groups or go to meetings they get to know people, build relationships then start noticing the key people who are making a difference in their local communities, a model that could be adopted elsewhere.

A lot of the planned work in the area was face-to-face community engagement, so service delivery has inevitably been affected by lockdown, but providers have done what they can to deliver services in other ways.

InUnity have continued to run girls' groups, giving out activity packs for online sessions which girls collect from a car-park enabling contact to take place within the Covid

guidelines. Packs have included sports equipment (footballs and skipping ropes) and art and craft materials. Online sessions have followed, including candle-making, a sewing workshop run by a tailor, step-by-step drawing with an artist and a pamper session. By maintaining contact through lockdown they hoped to demonstrate their commitment to the youngsters in the hope that they would then return to activities in due course. By keeping them engaged they were hoping to keep them off the streets. Photographing their activities then putting them on Instagram has kept the girls linked to each other.

InUnity have also been funded by the VRU to deliver a weekly Mentoring Triage service based at ARK Academy. Individuals are referred on to the Aston Villa Foundation, MAD or InUnity, all of whom offer a mentoring service. They provide a range of activities enabling relationships to be developed, then additional support to be provided from individuals who are already trusted by the young people. This went 'live' in January and 20 young people have already been referred. This is seen as a key preventative service within the area. Through all these services alternative pathways are starting to be offered to young people in Three Estates.

The Aston Villa Foundation has used football as an opportunity to try and build community cohesion. In addition to bringing groups together it has helped to breakdown some of the barriers between young people and the police. PCSOs and neighbourhood police get to know the young people by name and there is more mutual respect. During lockdown they tried to run virtual youth clubs, but they also went into schools to provide mentoring.

Spring to Life was commissioned to deliver the ACEs recovery toolkit, a 10-week programme for people who have experienced ACEs, to try and break the inter-generational transmission of trauma. However, because of Covid this had to be adapted. As an alternative they have provided ACEs Awareness training, primarily for services that are part of the Three Estates VRU network. Some of Spring to Life's therapists were going to go into schools to do some creative writing in relation to knife crime, but this has had to be put on hold.

Similarly to other organisations, Spring to Life were funded as part of the pilots but did not specifically differentiate between the work that is funded by the VRU and the work that is funded from other sources: *Our work there has really been strengthened by the input of the VRU and likewise what we're able to do locally through other funding sources is helping really strengthen our work with the VRU as well, so it's a nice sort of symbiotic process.*

Sport Birmingham has been providing training resources and support in relation to employment support and coaching to the other providers in the area. MAD (the youth arm of Sport Birmingham) has been working with the Youth service to provide some detached youth work with those young people that have still been out on the streets during lockdown. They have also delivered some support online during lockdown, running an online FIFA tournament and exploring the use of Tic-Toc to engage young people. Group work will start post lockdown.

One of the local schools will be hosting the YEF and VRU funded Challenge Academy which will provide a train the trainers programme so that four of their staff, the local PCSO and

staff at other Birmingham schools can train up facilitators and facilitate the Challenge Academy in Three Estates and other parts of Birmingham on an ongoing basis.

Information has been shared with young people, parents and providers about a range of subjects relevant to violence reduction including domestic violence and county lines awareness week.

Training

Spring to Life and Barnardo's have been commissioned to provide ACEs and trauma-informed practice training for staff from across the organisations working as part of the partnership. This has been very well received across the partner organisations and the partners believe this will have a major impact in changing the culture in their organisations. It is unclear exactly how many staff from Three Estates have completed the training as the figures are included within total figures for the whole of Birmingham. However, 402 individuals have been trained by Barnardo's (247 on ACEs and 155 on Trauma informed Practice) from 29 different organisations. These figures include the staff teams from one of the primary and one of the secondary schools in Three Estates. Barnardo's are conducting follow-up evaluations but not enough time has elapsed in most cases for this data to be meaningful.

Community Engagement

The pilot has begun to try to engage with local residents but it has been challenging to do this during lockdown. Prior to lockdown providers were asked to have conversations with local people and record these so their quotes could be included in the Local Needs Analysis as part of the Strategic Needs Assessment. The plan is to build on this work post lockdown.

The Pathfinders programme is engaging with local parents in volunteering, using a 'train the trainer' approach. The aim is to empower the community and give them the skills to deliver moving forward.

In recognition of the degree of concerns of residents in relation to crime on the estate and the antipathy towards the police, the Community Navigator worked with Hawkesley Centre and the police to set up an online residents' meeting to provide the opportunity to listen to local people. Approximately 30 individuals attended, though a number of these were from stakeholder and provider organisations. Those that were present clearly appreciated the opportunity to meet with all the key stakeholders including the MP and give their views. It is hoped that the discussions are going to lead to more community engagement initiatives such as StreetWatch, empowering the residents to take some responsibility and become the eyes and ears on the Estate. The possibility of setting up a residents' group was also discussed at the meeting. This work is being led by the manager of Hawkesley Centre who is also a local resident. It is hoped that this group will also be an opportunity to raise awareness of the Stakeholder Network and the VRU funded work in the area.

There was an acknowledgement that given the experience of this community and the lack of trust, that any approach needs to pull out *the great gems in communities* who already have that trust and who will advocate for young people but understand where the Police and the

VRU are coming from. There is a need to engage, empower and enable those people and overcome scepticism that the VRU pilot will be just another initiative that will be short-term.

They're focusing on some of the key pinch points in the community, which is lack of provision for youths, lack of a community hub and at the moment they are using that to engage. And if they do, for example, manage to get Greaves Hall, they'll need more community volunteers for that. It's something physically tangible that's there as a permanent flagship, and I think that will have a massive impact on how they then look to engage with community members.

Working with Stakeholders

The police have invested resources in early intervention. The school liaison officer for example, is engaging primary and secondary schools in the area, working to overcome the feeling of suspicion of the police and building trust. Projects have been established - Teamworks for primary school children and All Stars for secondary with a one day/week, six-week programme involving the RSPCA addressing knife crime, county lines and drug use, cyber bullying and the treatment of animals. Working with Cadbury College drama department a piece of work was developed, related to the issues experienced on Three Estates, which can be taken into schools. Three performances took place before Covid, engaging just under 400 students across two schools. It is believed that The All Stars and Teamworks programmes will *dampen down future crime demands*.

The pilot has had a significant impact within a short space of time. One area that it was felt could be given more attention is developing a counter-narrative, in relation to the area itself but also in relation to the perception of young people and breaking down some of the barriers with other age groups, particularly older people. The provision of a wide youth opportunities programme should, post Covid, offer young people more diversionary activities as well the opportunity to develop positive relationships with more trusted individuals. The pilot has been successful in maximising the resources available in the area and if the pilot is successful in acquiring Greaves Hall as a community resource, it will have created a lasting legacy which will contribute to achieving the VRU outcomes. As one local provider said: *The VRU work is for me, the next step towards reclaiming that area for the community and actually building another alternative for young people in the area.*

3.3 Walsall

3.3.1 Evaluation Process in the Pilot Area

Eleven interviews have been undertaken with training providers, community safety, voluntary organisations focused on youth violence prevention and supporting the victims of criminal and sexual exploitation and domestic abuse, a secondary school and tertiary college, students and local residents and, in the absence of a Community Navigator, the VRU Locality Manager. In addition, informal discussions were held with two young people who are part of the local youth forum and two youth forum meetings were observed when the topics were youth violence and mental health issues. Although the number of interviews completed in Walsall was fewer than undertaken in the two pilot areas described above,

which span a wider range of provision, experience and expertise, the pilot in Walsall had a more specific focus, so some conclusions can be still drawn from our research.

3.3.2 Perceptions of the Area

Walsall is a culturally diverse area with people of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi background making up the largest minority ethnic group²². It was described by the participants as quite a segregated community.

The town is in the top 10% most deprived local authorities in England, according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation statistics from 2019²³. The town centre is an area of high deprivation, with lots of closed and boarded up shops and litter.

End Child Poverty (ECP) research from 2020²⁴ estimates that 47% of children in Walsall South constituency, which includes St Matthew's where the main campus of Walsall College is located, are living in poverty, which equates to approximately 12,000 children. Both the College and the Bluecoat Academy reported high levels of poverty and young people going hungry. Both provide breakfast clubs (the school reporting that some children do not eat from when they leave school until when they return) and the College had to address period poverty long before it became a national issue. The school described having to be a safety net because *other agencies do not step in until it is way too late*. As well as food, they are providing clothing and shoes for children and young people.

3.3.3 Perceptions of Violence and Safety

According to the Safer Walsall Partnership²⁵ Walsall has the third lowest crime rate in the West Midlands after Solihull and Dudley, but like many urban areas recorded crime was up by 3.8% in the two years since 2018, higher than the West Midlands average, although it should be recognised that recorded crime is a problematic measure as it can be due to various factors, for example changes in law enforcement. The town centre experiences the highest levels of recorded crime with antisocial behaviour the largest proportion of the total, followed by violent and sexual offences, making up approximately a third. The main hotspots are close to the main Walsall College building in the town centre and the bus station. Youth violence increases between the hours of 3.00pm and 6.00pm. The rate of recorded possession of weapons offences is more than four times the West Midlands average which itself is 50% higher than the national rate. Violent crime in St Matthew's, the ward where the main College campus is located, is also relatively higher. Walsall College reported an increase in incidents relating to alcohol, drugs and weapon use from 40 in 2017 to almost 80 incidents in 2019. In terms of the West Midlands VRU Risk Index St Matthew's Ward (Walsall Central) is 9th of 39 neighbourhoods in Walsall and 53rd out of 356 in the West Midlands.

²² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates>

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/english-indications-of-deprivation>

²⁴ <https://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty-in-your-area-201415-201819/>

²⁵ <https://www.saferwalsallpartnership.co.uk//partnership-plan-8>

The College undertake regular surveys with their students and reported that 98-99% feel safe within the College but this figure reduces to 80% in the town centre where a Public Space Protection Order is in place. There are high levels of violence and knife crime. Homeless individuals and individuals engaging in drinking and drug-taking congregate in the area which local people describe as frightening. Gang violence is an issue. There are a lot of referrals for domestic violence across all groups and communities in the area.

The College described incidents of students being excluded as a consequence of carrying knives. This was seen as the main area of concern that led them to want to be part of the VRU pilot.

According to the participants in this evaluation, individuals of school-age appear to be particularly vulnerable to incidents of serious violence with it being so common that students and their families appear to accept violence as a way of life. The violence was felt to be focused on specific hotspots at particular times of the day. Young people from different schools have been involved in situations in the town centre in the evening, some involving serious violence. One student was hospitalised after a machete attack and there have been reports of knife fights and people turning up outside a neighbouring school with machetes. It was described how some students struggle to walk from one end of the town to the other without coming across some sort of incident or being assaulted and the traumatic impact that this has. There are particular concerns about the vulnerability of students at the College with disabilities and learning needs.

Children were described as having high levels of trauma in their background with many not experiencing a loving, caring, nurturing environment. The school was trying to provide a package of support for students at risk of or involved in exploitation, with families linked to domestic violence or with trauma in their own background. This included sessions for groups of girls on low self-esteem and healthy relationships.

Concerns were raised about the number of youngsters who are being groomed into familial gangs, making it even more difficult for them to break out of the lifestyle:

We've got a lot of issues in Walsall with cousins, brothers, fathers and it's sort of a family thing that your next step is to join this gang, so we've got a long way to go in terms of scratching the surface with that, because that's a different mindset completely, that you're groomed into a familial gang and network.

One teacher spoke of concerns about exploitation being on the increase and significant problems with anti-social behaviour in the evenings in the town centre, from school children from 7 or 8 local schools, often leading to physical violence, petty theft, muggings and car races. Returning to school after a weekend, pupils would share details of serious violent incidents that had occurred. The young people we spoke to talked about feeling safe most of the time in the town, but they could see that it might be intimidating for individuals from outside of the area because of the number of young people that 'hang around'.

There are high incidences of domestic violence including sexual violence across all groups and communities in the area. Concerns were raised about the possibility of hate crime increasing post-Brexit in view of the presence of far-right factions in the area that were evident during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations.

It was suggested by one participant that lockdown has lowered people's tolerance levels in relation to anti-social behaviour. People are feeling frustrated as a result of the restrictions making them more likely to react to low-level incidents.

Young people at the Youth Forum and those we spoke to expressed concerns about the gender-focus of some of the preventative work in relation to knife crime. It was reported at the forum that 1,500 females were charged with carrying knives in 2019 however, media attention is focused on incidents involving males resulting in the role of females rarely being highlighted. One young person said: *It is important that the media is truthful so people understand the extent of what is going on. We should also start to talk about it ourselves and try to understand.*

3.3.4 Community Assets

According to the interviewed participants there are significant community assets which can be utilised for violence reduction across Walsall but there is a feeling that they are dispersed and patchy: *I think it just needs co-ordinating. I think if we broke it down and we looked at....what other wonderful organisations do across Walsall, we've probably got a lot of the elements....and they're probably covered. It just needs bringing together under the VRU's umbrella because they're missing out on a lot of good work.*

A number of organisations and umbrella bodies were highlighted to us as playing a key role in the town. One Walsall is the voice of the voluntary sector in Walsall, bringing together a wide range of organisations, though it was viewed as being more focused on working with adults rather than young people. They were described as holding useful community conversations, linking in with the education and statutory resources in the area.

There are some organisations in the area with significant experience of working with vulnerable young people and families and who have expertise in working in Walsall and other parts of the country. Street Teams specialise in working with children and young people at high risk of exploitation. They provide a range of services including 'New Beginnings' which provides housing and support for sex workers, one to one support for young people and training and awareness raising for teachers and other professionals, parents and carers. Black Country Women's Aid provide children and young people's advocates, outreach support in schools, one-to-one support for young people and workshops and programmes about child sexual exploitation and other situations where children may be exposed to domestic violence at home. The James Brindley Foundation is a charity that aims to bring about positive social change in addressing youth violence, developing and delivering programmes for schools. The organisation was established by a family whose son died as a result of knife crime. They have developed training programmes and an assessment tool for professionals, to enable them to assess the risk of offending. They have trained organisations including Walsall Youth Justice Services, a local prison, some voluntary sector organisations and local youth workers. In addition, all schools and colleges across Walsall were contacted with the offer of training, with a disappointing take-up.

Youth Connect was originally set up to work primarily with Muslim young people in South Walsall, using the skills and experiences of community members. They provide a range of programmes and activities including activities in parks and detached youth work and outreach. Whilst centres have been closed during the lockdown they have used web chats to keep in contact with young people and have distributed activity packs.

A key asset that is lacking in the area is youth clubs. The young people that we spoke to expressed concern about the lack of places for younger people to go and hangout.

The area does not have a directory of local resources, however one provider said: *We've done community mapping. It's all there, it just needs bringing together.*

As well as organisations, individuals were underlined who were going into schools to share their personal experience, one being the mother of a boy who was murdered and another, a former gang member. The value of having lived experience and a local, personal connection was recognised.

3.3.5 The VRU work in the Area

The VRU pilot in Walsall has taken a different approach to any of the others, focusing solely on the education sector and one large institution in particular. Understandably this pilot has faced particular challenges as a result of Covid because of the closure of educational settings for lengthy periods and these then having to spend significant time on planning for re-opening.

The pilot, which began in December 2019, has been focused on supporting Walsall College and Bluecoat Church of England Academy to support young people who are most at risk with early upstream interventions. They are both aiming to become trauma-informed organisations. The College has approximately 4,000 students aged 16-18, 7,000 adults studying on a part-time basis and approximately 2,000 apprenticeships out in the workplace, so it has a significant footfall in terms of engaging young people. The aim is to take a whole College approach to preventing and reducing violence in Walsall. The College had always worked collaboratively with the police and different partners, as regards to understanding the contextualised safeguarding issues within Walsall, with the police passing on information about gang membership, child exploitation perpetrators or victims that has enabled the College to keep students safe.

Prior to involvement in the pilot, under the disciplinary process within the College, if a student was caught in possession of drugs they would go on a rehabilitation or drugs awareness course. They would have to complete this to be able to keep their place in the College. However, if they were caught with knives or were involved in any form of violence they were immediately permanently excluded, on the basis that this was necessary to keep the community within the college safe. It became clear that this blanket approach could result in vulnerable young people being pushed out onto the streets and it was decided that a different approach was needed.

The VRU funding has enabled ACEs Awareness, Trauma-Informed Practice and mental health awareness training to be provided for the staff and students at the College and coaching and mentoring for individuals considered to be at risk or who have experienced trauma. The funding has also enabled the Bluecoat Academy to train staff in ACEs and trauma informed practice. Street Teams and Black Country Women's Aid were commissioned to provide direct support at the College so that young people could seek advice in relation to exploitation and self-refer with the aim of providing early intervention and a fast-track response. They were also funded to provide awareness training and one day a week's counselling at Bluecoat Academy. This sat alongside intensive mentoring that was funded from another source. Education prevention packs were given out within the school and college to start conversations about knife crime and exploitation to try and provide a counter-narrative. Awareness programmes have been delivered within the college and the school about healthy relationships, staying safe and child sexual exploitation.

The funding has also supported the provision of counselling support from WPH Counselling for children at the Bluecoat Academy and supervisory support for the counselling staff at Walsall College.

Prior to the pilot starting the James Brindley Foundation received a small amount of funding from the VRU to take elements of the James Brindley Full Circle Programme and work them into a new programme to be delivered by Mentors in Violence. It was not clear how this work has been progressed by the VRU.

3.3.6 Progress towards the VRU Outcomes

The pilot has successfully developed and tested a new and innovative approach, taking two locations and implementing a strategic approach. An extremely comprehensive package of ACEs Awareness, Trauma-informed practice, mental health first aid, mentoring, coaching and support have been put in place. The programme has been able to demonstrate clear outcomes. 30 students who would have been excluded because of their behaviours were supported to remain in tertiary education. Similarly, we were given examples of 2 young people who would have been excluded from school had the support not been in place. Progress has clearly been made in increasing the aspirations for young people and ensuring they have the opportunity to succeed and fulfil their potential.

There has been very significant buy-in from both educational settings who have reported a change in culture within their staff teams and a much greater recognition and understanding of the causes of youth violence. The College were very clear that their approach has changed, with staff far more focused on understanding the reasons for any misbehaviour and trying to have conversations and provide support, coaching or mentoring if necessary. We are aware that some of the college's public service students have been trained to be peer mentors for violence reduction but apart from being given one example, it was more difficult to see the outcomes of this.

We understand that the intention is to broaden out the pilot to bring in new educational settings and in due course to incorporate community-based stakeholders and providers. However, some of the comments below on key aspects of the pilot indicate that the focus

on just one sector to date may present challenges when trying to give the pilot a broader remit.

- ***The VRU Approach***

Although the College had a good understanding of the aims and objectives of the VRU and how their work fitted within this, there did not seem to be a clear understanding of the approach amongst all the commissioned providers. Some of the providers that were brought in to support the work of the educational establishments told us that they did not understand the end game and the long-term plan of what they are trying to achieve.

- ***The Stakeholder Network***

Although a stakeholder network was in place when the evaluation of the pilot began, this appeared to operate in an informal way and had a very limited membership. It is understood that a decision was taken that this should have an educational focus because of the nature of the pilot. However, those organisations that attended felt that whilst they did benefit from these meetings they were concerned that conversations were taking place with the usual partners rather than trying to bring more people to the table. One local provider who plays a key role in violence reduction could not understand how they had not been included or even informed about the network. This lack of engagement had left them feeling discouraged and demotivated.

The interviewed providers described the importance of having a single point of contact that understands exploitation and the approach needed. When a Community Navigator was in place for a short time they appreciated the presence of this post. However, during this time an effective network was not developed, gaps in provision identified, responses to violence coordinated nor the development of the VRU work communicated. Commissioned providers were concerned about what impact this would have on the outcomes and impact of the pilot as they felt that the role was critical, particularly for co-ordination and service delivery. We understand that this role has now filled, which will be welcomed by local providers.

- ***Commissioning Processes***

The College was very positive about the input from the VRU in helping them to decide how funds could help them to take forward their agenda in developing a trauma-informed organisation: *They were really really supportive. They really wanted to make a difference. We were very careful about how we were going to invest the funds and what it meant and what we were going to get out of it.*

Other participants were pleased that they had been given financial support but were less positive about the process: *We were asked to be a partner within the VRU...So the VRU's location was decided already, that was Walsall College. We didn't have any consultation with that. We were asked to be a service provider along with another provider....It was like 'this is the VRU and this is what we're going to do'. It was like the conversations about what we're going to do have already been preset and pre-done, so we only get told what has been decided. This is what we need you to do, can you do it? We've got this bit of money and we're going to look at doing this, what can you do for this?*

The same provider said: *What doesn't work for me, which would be really valuable to feed back, is if people don't understand the landscape of Walsall, and the people that are making the decisions as to where these projects fit, then it's pointless. You actually need to involve your operational projects to build your plan. Because they're the ones that will say to you "that won't work".*

The interviewed participants also expressed concerns about the choice of just two locations (the College and the school) feeling that this limited opportunities to target some of those that are most in need, as well as working with the whole family.

It was also highlighted that clear introduction of the VRU and communication of its aims would have been beneficial:

What I would suggest at the start of any other pilot in any other area is have an actual sit-down meeting with everybody and fully describe with an easy to understand, hour or two-hour training session on what it actually means, what we're actually doing, why we're actually doing it and what we want the outcomes to be, would be my advice. Instead of just 'we've got to do this now, because we've got the money now, and it needs to be done now' and just rushing into it.

One provider voiced concerns about a long delay waiting for a response from the VRU following a funding application.

However, there was some positive feedback about additional bereavement support that was funded by the VRU to support the staff and children at a school in dealing with the trauma of the sudden death of their headteacher (though it was not clear whether this was under the auspices of the pilot):

Fabulous stuff is happening because of the VRU...the extra counselling funded by the VRU is phenomenal, the children that have been helped...the pastoral staff and other members of staff that are struggling to get counselling which means that they can now go back to schools and do their job. ...We know that they are also helping kids that are struggling and the skills they've learnt in counselling is having a ripple effect, you know, with the population we are dealing with...What the VRU is providing this year for young people and children is absolutely phenomenal in my opinion.

- **Interventions**

The majority of the violence reduction work has taken in place in one location-Walsall College. Being based in one location has made it easier to bring about change. The aim has been to change the culture and become a trauma-informed organisation so that students' behaviour would be approached differently. The College has trained its 850 staff in ACEs awareness and introduced targeted approaches with counselling and support to ensure that individuals who previously would have been excluded remain within the education system. The police have shared information about which students are involved in gangs and any that they have picked up, enabling a targeted approach to be taken with workshops, support,

mentoring and counselling being provided to try and change the mindset of the individual. As a result of this work, 30 students who would have been excluded have continued with their education, so there is clear evidence of impact. The gender split of this group was 70% male/30% female, confirming the views of the young people we spoke to and the youth forum that we attended, that it is ensure that services are meeting the needs of both genders.

56 staff members in the College have received mental health first aid training and mental health awareness training. A local counselling service provides supervisory support of the counsellors who provide direct support to students. Tutorials have taken place on gangs. The aim has been to coach individuals and change their mindset so they understand that they can make choices about their future. An organisation called Grit, who had done a lot of work with Nottingham Trent University, has run a coaching programme for students in the college focusing on changing their thinking which the college felt led to a *phenomenal change in those individuals*. The VRU funded this programme in the first year and the College themselves have funded it in the second year.

The interventions have built on the other work going on in the college to take forward the objectives of the VRU pilot. Nurses came into the college and talked to students about any health queries including issues in relation to sexual health. Drug dogs are brought into the College and knife arches are put in place following incidents. Public services students have undertaken a two-day peer mentor course on violence reduction. This has skilled them up to go into classrooms and teach other students about violence reduction, work on different scenarios and what you should do in certain situations. They have also got involved in local Street Watch and Neighbourhood Watch Schemes.

The aim had been for students to be able to access support from Street Teams in relation to any concerns about exploitation issues and Black Country Women's Aid in relation to domestic abuse. Street Teams were also commissioned by the VRU to provide training for college staff and to provide a direct referral scheme at the college whereby students could request support if required.

The fact that they are available to the students is an important factor because for a student who would like those services or need those services it is important for them to be there, you know, whether or not they are in a domestic violence situation or they feel they are in an exploitation situation, there's people who can help them.

A drop-in service was established; however, there were concerns about how this was set-up and over a three-month period no young people chose to access the service, though we were told that a new strategy was being developed and it was going to be re-launched. It was felt that errors had been made at the start of the project with funding being allocated then projects being asked to 'pull something together' to fit the criteria for the funding. It was suggested that operational projects need to be involved in building the plan of what is needed in an area and have the opportunity to submit proposals, which they believe will be effective in meeting the required outcomes.

The College had an Ofsted inspection in March 2020. A member of staff pointed out: *They just thought it was fabulous what we were doing, you know. And they said, 'this is fantastic'. So, you know, there was sort of that external view as well where they said this is a really good model. So, I think the VRU have had a significant impact on us.*

The VRU has also commissioned Street Teams to provide an early intervention scheme of 16 hours a week within the Bluecoat Academy, to offer a quick response to boys at risk of exploitation. Unfortunately, like at the College, no referrals had been made to that service either. It was questioned why this particular school was chosen for the pilot as not many referrals had been made previously and it was described as well supported already by other agencies.

Events for schools had been planned but these were unable to take place because of Covid. The commissioned providers have given schools education prevention packs, a toolkit which helps to start conversations with girls about healthy relationships and self-esteem and with boys about the risk of getting involved in gangs, exploitation and knife crime. Mentoring has been provided for boys who could have faced exclusion. Children and young people experiencing the effects of trauma, for example domestic violence and abuse, have been able to access mental health provision and receive support. Some concerns were raised with us about the way the issue of gender is treated in work in relation to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE); with a belief that the focus is on supporting girls to be more aware of how to keep themselves safe. It was suggested that there needed to be more of a focus on teaching boys how to treat females appropriately, a point that has been very much to the fore recently following the murder of Sarah Everard.

Black Country Women's Aid has a team of advocates that provide one-to-one support for young people. Like Street Teams, they have been offering support at Walsall College and the Bluecoat Academy. They deliver workshops and programmes about child sexual exploitation and other situations where children may be exposed to domestic violence. They have been funded by the VRU to deliver awareness programmes within the college and two programmes within the school, ACCEPT and VOICES about healthy relationships, staying safe and child sexual exploitation. They have also been funded to provide direct support to pupils, but like Street Teams they have not received the number of referrals they expected (only three within the first three months).

The impact of the package of support that the project enabled to be put in place in the Bluecoat Academy was described as significant, providing a toolkit of resources, access to mental health provision and training to develop the skills and understanding of staff. As indicated above a very specific example was shared of two students who could have been permanently excluded, had the support of the project not been available. A teacher at the school described the support that is now in place and the significant value of the services delivered by the project given the challenges in accessing appropriate support:

Both of those students are now receiving weekly mentoring as well as the work we're doing with them in school to try and change the course of where they're going.

We have so many children who cannot access mental health provision outside of school, because the waiting lists are enormous. And they just can't. And so, the counselling for us

has again been really important in helping us, a lot of students who are experiencing the effects of trauma whether it be domestic violence abuse, family difficulties. And that has come to the fore in lockdown and having the ability for us to target the children who we can see really need it, actually is really important.

However, when the country went into lockdown it was difficult to maintain the counselling services that had been commissioned at the Bluecoat Academy. If relationships were already in place with counsellors some youngsters were happy to continue this online, but not all had access to smartphones or laptops. It was not possible to establish new relationships virtually.

One of the outcomes from the support was improved attendance of the vast majority of students involved in the project.

- **Community Engagement**

The nature of the pilot meant that the focus was on two educational establishments and no community conversations took place in relation to how the pilot could be taken forward or with the providers themselves, who felt that there were significant limitations from this approach. One of the providers felt that an opportunity had also been missed to engage the night-time economy, taxi drivers, hotels, fast food outlets, moving away from the traditional list of stakeholders (statutory services, local voluntary organisations, faith organisations) and involving other types of organisations that have an interest in reducing violence in the local community.

Similarly, it was felt that there are particular projects happening in Walsall focused specifically on bringing about conversations about exploitation, anti-social behaviour, violence and grooming which could have contributed to the pilot. The Community Futures Project run by Street Teams have recruited local people as community champions who have lived in the area for some time and have a personal commitment to the area, targeting individuals who are already involved in running local groups and activities. They hand out leaflets, make relationships with the local shops and go into schools and the GP surgeries. The approach is reported to have been extremely successful in getting people talking, with their online sessions involving 30-40 people. People want to protect, talk about and learn about their neighbourhood. The project is funded for five years by the Lottery because it is recognised that this model of community engagement takes time.

Within Walsall there is a Youth Forum supported by the VRU with each meeting focusing on a particular topic. Local stakeholders can attend the online meetings and ask questions of the young people. Providers fed back how much they value this opportunity to engage directly with young people from the area. One talked about how they had sought their views on why young people were not accessing their services. We were able to put questions to the forum about their views on youth violence and to have informal conversations with some of the older members of the group. One of the key concerns of young people in the area was the lack of a police presence. Some of the females felt that there should be more stop and searches. They believed that young people should be educated about the dangers of carrying a knife from the age of 12 onwards. In relation to working with young people they liked the model of having peer mentors. One young person

told us of her experience of being a peer mentor and how she was able to support a friend to disclose potential exploitation as a result of the training she had received.

The young people in the area talked about the lack of youth provision and the need for more youth clubs and other activities to prevent young people from just roaming the streets. They were concerned about the level of knife crime, though the individuals we spoke to told us that they did not personally know anyone who carried a knife. There was recognition that girls are also very vulnerable to child criminal exploitation and a feeling that there needed to be a greater focus on girls rather than seeing this as a primarily 'male' issue.

- **Training**

As already stated an extremely comprehensive package of ACEs Awareness, Trauma-informed practice and mental health awareness and first-aid training has been provided at the College. Training was also provided for staff by the counter-terrorism unit on the meaning of different tattoos. This has given them practical information that has enabled them to initiate conversations about Prevent, radicalisation and extremism. Further training is due to take place from St Giles on county lines and the use of language. Street Teams are due to provide training on online and cyber safety.

The training provided for staff in schools has enhanced awareness, acceptance and understanding of difficulties and has helped them to better identify mental health concerns and the impact of trauma. It supported the launch of restorative practice within one school. The staff's heightened knowledge along with other support now in place has led to a significant increase in safeguarding referrals. Staff are now more aware of triggers and the red flags students put up, when they are crying out for help.

The training was valued as a means of developing the awareness of schools and college staff who will then be able to recognise which young people are at risk of exploitation, however, there were concerns that there may not be sufficient resources to meet the needs that may then be identified. For example, one provider said:

But if we raise awareness with 850 tutors and 1000's of children, you've got to have the service in place to meet the need when they report it or they will only report it once...What's going to happen to these young people once awareness has been raised and issues have been brought to the forefront?

It was felt that training could not be undertaken in isolation. This has to be backed up by mentoring, counselling and support.

There was clear evidence of outcomes having been achieved as a result of the work undertaken at Walsall College and a belief that the VRU had made a substantial difference in helping them to find a clear way forward to change the culture. Likewise, at the Academy, there was recognition of what the project has provided and allowed them to do in terms of access to additional support and training. This positive feedback has been expressed in the following way:

What this project does is give us the toolkit, a wider toolkitWith each tier, I see it as what can we do to support them into being in a healthier place and making them have better life chances. And that's what this project allows us to do.

The work at the educational establishments has clearly been successful and can act as a model for becoming a trauma-informed organisation which could be rolled out within other schools and colleges. However, there was also a sense from some providers in the area that the pilot had not worked as effectively as it could have done for a number of reasons. It was felt that it was limited in scope being focused on just two locations, missing the opportunity to engage some of the existing community initiatives. In addition, the support that could be provided under the auspices of the pilot was limited to support for students, missing an opportunity to provide counselling services to their families such as domestic abuse advocates and family support workers that might have been beneficial. There were also concerns that the pilot was set up at the same time as a new hub was established in Walsall by the local authority, which was meant to respond to any child criminal or sexual exploitation or county lines, causing confusion as to where referrals should be made. Concerns were also expressed about the lack of collaboration with providers in the area, particularly in relation to identifying how the VRU outcomes could be met across organisations. Meetings were not taking place to agree priorities in the area and there were key stakeholders who were not engaged in the process. Structures were not in place to enhance collaboration. However, all of our interviews and observations took place prior to the appointment of a new Community Navigator so it is possible that these concerns may have already been addressed. It is important that they do not detract from what has been a very successful pilot.

3.4 Dudley

3.4.1 Evaluation Process in the Pilot Area

Ten interviews have been undertaken with a range of stakeholders and providers, including the local authority, a school, providers of support for young people at risk of CCE and CSE, community safety, local residents and the Community Navigator. Observations have taken place of seven steering group meetings and nine training and parent awareness sessions (Modern Slavery, Raising Parental Awareness of Child Exploitation and Youth Violence – The Impact of School Exclusions, Exploitation and Grooming, Gangs and Carrying Weapons, Your Rights and the Law, The Dangers of Social Media, Community Member Domestic Abuse Training, ACEs Awareness and Trauma-Informed Practice).

The pilot in Dudley is very new, therefore our evaluation has focused on seeking the initial thoughts of a range of stakeholders, providers and residents in the area.

3.4.2 Perceptions of the Area

St. James is right in the town centre of Dudley and is one of the most deprived wards in the Dudley borough. Dudley was seen as having a declining town centre with lots of boarded up shops with bedsits on top. It was suggested that a significant number of properties are

owned by dishonest landlords who allow properties to become rundown, which contributes to a general environment that looks unkempt and has an unpredictable and chaotic atmosphere. One resident asked: *Who actually owns Dudley*, feeling that the structure of ownership is critical when considering who is responsible for the state of the environment and improving the area. Poor street lighting also impacts on this. It was felt that more could be done to care for the area. There was criticism of the lack of activities for young people. The implications of the cuts to youth services were constantly referred to by both professionals and local people.

Residents felt that the area lacked a sense of community with neighbours not necessarily knowing each other. Although this was contradicted by another resident who said: *There's a culture of really knowing people and getting to know people really well and being in and out of houses*. There does not seem to be an active presence of people within the area trying to address issues or a space for people to share any concerns or views. In the neighbouring ward there are regular forums where local residents meet with the local Councillor. The previous MP was considered to be very active, took on a number of initiatives and local people felt they could contact him with their concerns, but they are now missing that *energy*. They want forums where people can come together and say how they feel. The area seems to lack leadership and coherency.

One resident talked about the fact that he had never seen a public display of grief following a high-profile death. There were no flowers left at the scene following gang-related murders. He could not explain why this might be the case.

It is a mixed area, with a lot of owner-occupied housing alongside areas of council and social housing. The area has only a small percentage of people from black and minority ethnic communities. Unemployment is high and there are few opportunities; for young people the future can seem bleak. As one teacher said:

A lot of these young people's parents have grown up in industries that just don't exist anymore. And particularly amongst white working-class boys, there is a real lack of aspiration.What can I do in the future? What is there in this area for me?

And the fear was that with the impact of Covid this situation will only get worse.

There is a feeling that there are few activities for young people to engage. A resident noted:

When I was a kid growing up in Dudley there was youth clubs, there was football teams. There was access to lots of things that, you know, kids could access after school. A lot of that has gone away so you know, they get to 6 or 7 o'clock in the evening and the only thing they can do is hang around at parks or shopping centres and once they're there, once you know the criminal elements in society know that, they know they're vulnerable, they know that cash and nice clothes or mobile phones is a way in with those young people. And then they become targets and that's how they get drawn in.

3.4.3 Perceptions of Violence and Safety

It was pointed out that, being right in the town centre, some of the issues around violence and safety are the same as any other town centre and that some of the problems are not caused by people who live locally but by those coming into the city centre.

There was real concern at what is seen as a significant increase in activity linked to county lines and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE); the increase in gang-related incidents and the fact that more young people are carrying knives. Schools are increasingly using knife arches to try and ensure the safety of pupils. There are particular concerns about the number of incidents that take place on public transport. One resident described how someone took a knife to her throat while she was sitting on the bus.

Residents spoke of their concerns about the openness of drug use, alcohol abuse, shoplifting on the High Street, stabbings, rival gangs, as well as recent murders in the area²⁶. There was a real sense that things are getting worse. Someone who grew up in and now works in the area said:

Some of what's going on, at the minute, it's gone to another level really. And I don't think there's one key thing you could say is the cause of it. I think it's a myriad of different things. I think socially some of the deprivation and things like that are a cause. I think the breakdown, maybe, in the family, in families is a bit of a cause and then you've got all the pressures people are putting on themselves in terms of social media, peer pressures and things like that. And I think if we don't set up things like the VRU and start being really pro-active, we could find ourselves in a much more difficult situation in the next 5 or 6 years. It's definitely changed, and I think it's not as safe a community as it used to be.

The sharing of incidents on Facebook as well as the naming of perpetrators only contributes to raising anxiety within the community.

Residents felt that there had been an increase in violent incidents post-Covid with stabbings and machete attacks in the area. One resident who was interviewed described how he had come across a potential burglar in his garden the previous week. A fatal shooting took place during the course of the evaluation. However, one of the interviewed residents described their children as feeling unsafe at times, rather than permanently anxious. There was a sense that police are only visible in the area following incidents, so their presence (armed police on occasions) tends to raise anxieties rather than alleviate them. Residents wanted to see the police and PCSOs building connections with the community, getting to know local residents so that people would trust them more and be more likely to share information. This would also help the police to build up a clearer picture of the dynamics of the place.

One organisation reported that there are particular concerns in the area about the level of anti-social behaviour and potential exploitation in the vicinity of Sycamore Short-Stay School and questioned whether young people are safe walking home from school.

3.4.4 Community Assets

²⁶ <https://www.itv.com/news/central/2021-01-31/man-in-critical-condition-after-dudley-shooting>

The following organisations were highlighted by participants as being particularly valued. Barnardo's provides ACEs awareness and trauma-informed practice 'train the trainer' training and support for providers in the area and awareness sessions for parents. They created resources to support the return of pupils back to school after the lockdown. They employ a Child Sexual Exploitation worker who receives all medium-high risk cases from Dudley Children's Services. Dudley itself has a new contextual safeguarding hub that has a CCE and a CSE officer.

It was felt that there are quite a few individuals and organisations who are trying to improve the area but there is a lack of co-ordination and there is not a place where they can come together. The local Church provides a chaplaincy presence in secondary schools and the college, providing opportunities for pupils and students who want to chat and don't feel able to talk to a teacher or a person in authority. Places of Worship, a national initiative with a presence in local communities, provide a drop-in centre where anyone can call in for a hot drink and a chat. CHADD (Churches Housing Association of Dudley) provide housing for 1,000 vulnerable people, including those who have escaped domestic abuse, have mental health issues or have experienced exploitation. Gather Dudley CIC has a coffee shop in the shopping centre where they encourage people to come together 'to help make Dudley the place where things happen'. Their activities include hosting a 'Knit and Natter' group, a craft group and giving out a substantial amount of food. Creative Care support adults with mental health and emotional needs; individuals do not necessarily have to have a diagnosis making it a valued resource by the community.

A boxing club works with boys and young men, but other than this there is a lack of youth clubs. The local church is hoping to set one up in a building on one of the estates.

The aim of Krunch is to increase emotional health and well-being and help children to stay in education, recognising that a settled educational placement can be one of the predictive factors for young people being less likely to be involved in violence and crime. They provide one-to-one mentoring for youngsters who are anxious or have troubles at school or peer/family issues. Most of their referrals are from schools. They are currently providing two projects in Dudley. One is funded by the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) for years 6-7 and the second is funded by the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF). Both are aimed at preventing exclusion. They highlight issues of safety, what healthy relationships look like and give youngsters the chance to talk about any concerns.

Navigate is a project run by Barnardo's, Phase Trust and CHADD. The service works with young people aged 8-18 who are displaying some concerns in relation to child criminal exploitation, providing a triage service, then allocating individuals to the most relevant organisation for mentoring and support. Initially there were hardly any referrals to Navigate. The staff team had to push to get into schools and to make them understand the early signs of exploitation. However, we were told that prior to lockdown there had been a significant increase in awareness of exploitation and youth violence and schools are now the main source of referrals, though inevitably schools being closed has meant that pastoral managers, school counsellors and mentors have not been in a position to spot who needs referring.

The Phase Trust are doing detached youth work, making links with young people on the streets, trying to understand what's happening to them, looking at patterns of behaviour, the groups that congregate, why and at what times. They are aiming to gain as much intelligence as possible about the experience of young people and are befriending them in their environment.

CKSN provide mentoring services for young people. They use innovative ways of getting young people to express themselves, taking them into recording studios to make music and videos that enable them to have a voice.

Here4YOUth have their own centre which offers a safe space and offers advice and information on a range of topics including drugs and alcohol, employment, housing, benefits and well-being. They offer varying levels of intervention.

First Class Foundation is a charity tackling youth violence, building mental health resilience and connecting young people to their purpose. Working mainly across the West Midlands, they provide a range of services, including monthly kitchen table talks offering a safe and open platform and providing support to parents, whose young people are in the youth justice system.

A parent was particularly positive about the impact of involvement with the local Army cadets on her two sons.

The police ran a one-week programme in 2020 through the Prince's Trust for those aged 12-16 at risk of committing crime and it is hoped that this will be repeated again this year. The police shared with the stakeholder network an example of two young people who had been identified as being at risk of offending who had completed the programme last year and subsequently went on to join the police.

3.4.5 The VRU Work in the Area

The Community Navigator applied for the role in July 2020, but due to the length of the vetting process, did not take up post until the middle of December, working 3 days a week. Prior to this, thanks to their existing employer, they were able to begin work, one day a week from the end of September, beginning to look at the needs of the local area and getting the network up and running, including sending out terms of reference and getting partners together. Once the Navigator took up post, work could then begin on all the other aspects of the role including commissioning providers and setting up training. The contract initially was until March 31st. A month ago, a three-month extension was offered until the end of June.

The Community Navigator has focused on bringing together stakeholders and providers in the St. James Plus area who would have a major part in violence reduction to discuss the needs of the community, set priorities for delivery, raise awareness of services and enable collaboration. The pilot is taking a particular focus on parenting support.

The project has commissioned:

- Parenting support workshops - a collaboration between the local authority parenting team, First Class Foundation and Navigate. The training is supported by a parenting support helpline. The training helps parents recognise the signs of exploitation and learn how to respond appropriately in a non-judgemental, safe space. The training is delivered during the day and in the evening in an attempt to reach as many parents as possible. Topics include: The Impact of School Exclusions, Exploitation and Grooming, Gangs and Carrying Weapons, Your Rights and the Law (including Stop and Search) and The Dangers of Social Media
- CSKN and Here4YOUth- Lived experience mentors are targeting 6-8 young people who are on the verge of being exploited.
- Real Direction- A project which is about to begin has been commissioned specifically for the Pupil Referral Unit in Dudley. This work programme, addressing exploitation and county lines in particular, will be delivered to the young people over 15/16 weeks by people with lived experience including those who have been imprisoned for exploitation, parents and young people who have been themselves been exploited.

3.4.6 Progress towards the VRU Outcomes

The pilot has only been underway for a short period of time but appears to have already made good progress. As a result of his joint post in the Youth Offending team the Community Navigator had existing good links with many of the parties that have joined the stakeholder network.

Progress in relation to the key aspects of the pilot project is detailed below:

The VRU approach

There was widespread praise from both providers and stakeholders for the work of the pilot, for its flexibility, openness to ideas, creating opportunities for dialogue, enabling a better understanding of different perspectives, developing a holistic approach and drive to get things moving forward.

The Stakeholder Network

The network includes approximately 20 organisations represented by 35 individuals. Most meetings have an attendance of approximately 16-18 individuals. By meeting weekly they have been trying to make up some of the time lost as a result of the pilot starting late. The group is bringing together different services so they can ensure that they complement rather than replicate each other. They have agreed terms of reference and aims and objectives. The group has undertaken a lot of mapping and information sharing and is trying to maximise the opportunities provided by the existing services. The providers talked about good conversations taking place between organisations that did not talk to each other at all previously. Smaller organisations fed back that they felt that the VRU had really championed grassroots organisations and recognised the power of the third sector, treating them as equals with the statutory sector. A provider commented:

It is definitely contributing to people understanding that they've got to talk across agencies and share information about children, places, locations so that we can understand better the

drivers for children finding certain lifestyles, activities and places interesting, and wanting to go and experience what's going on with those places and people or why are they being drawn in and who is doing what....Children are being seen in the context of where they live and what's happening in their area, giving a greater insight into their actual environment.

There have been various examples of collaboration between providers and stakeholders including the submission of joint bids, the sharing of Covid-secure premises, the planning of awareness sessions and the development of appropriate practices including policies and approaches in relation to knife arches in schools.

Stakeholders described some of the benefits of the stakeholder network:

Giving us access to all those different professionals and all those things we can tap into, has been and is really useful moving forward....You've got your educational people, you've got your social care people, the Police, so you've got a whole raft of agencies, that probably have that quality time for an hour or more to talk about things and from there hopefully, that will develop to working in the community on the ground which then makes a difference.

One member of the group felt that the membership is predominantly from organisations that will usually engage in discussions about youth violence and felt that it would be helpful to involve more community groups and smaller community organisations.

The commitment of individuals was demonstrated by, for example, people attending the meetings on days off and several members of staff attending from one organisation.

In view of the benefits of the stakeholder network which are already in evidence, providers and stakeholders shared their anxieties that the work of the pilot would be short-term.

Interventions

Work has only been commissioned from December 2020 until March 2021; therefore it is too soon to evaluate the outcomes. What is known is that a wide range of parenting sessions has taken place, and these have been well received. As a result of Covid these have had to take place online which has probably impacted on the numbers attending, though for some people this is a benefit as it makes it easier for them to attend and can allow greater anonymity. From comments made, the parents that have attended appear to have got a great deal from the sessions, valuing the opportunity to develop the knowledge, understanding and appropriate strategies in relation to responding to signs of exploitation. The sessions have included the opportunity for parents to stay on at the end of the session for individual conversations and people have taken advantage of this. In addition, parents can take up the opportunity of using a telephone advice service which is available one morning and one evening a week. A session on Stop and Search enabled families to share their children's experience of this and clarification to be sought in relation to the powers of police which parents present made clear was extremely useful.

The sessions have been highly informative and well presented with one parent saying: *I thought it was amazing, really insightful*, but at some sessions the number of people attending has been disappointing. We were conscious that the sessions had to be set up and delivered within very tight timescales and within the constraints of Covid, resulting in parents having less notice than usual. All communication had to take place online, which will not be successful with all groups. We believe that it is important that the sessions continue, looking at how these can be promoted as widely as possible, particularly focusing on those that are hard-to-reach and those who experience digital exclusion.

Lockdown restrictions have inevitably impacted on the numbers of individuals that have been supported and the way services have been delivered. Mentoring services, provided by the lived experience mentors from CSKN and Here4YOUth, have had to transfer online, though some mentoring arrangements have continued face-to-face where possible, as this is the preferred way of working.

Training

The area has already started a programme of ACEs Awareness and Trauma-Informed Practice training run by Barnardo's. Imminent plans include VRU delivery of a workshop on knife crime – Precious Lives to young people, targeted specifically at clients of the Youth Offending Service. Domestic violence training is also in the pipeline, provided by Black Country Women's Aid.

Commissioning Processes

The stakeholder network was involved in decision-making about the use of the budget, resulting in the commissioning of the services of Real Direction to work at the Pupil Referral Unit. The provision of funding has helped to fill some of the gaps in services; however, concerns were expressed about the very short period of time given to providers to produce a plan and submissions for the initial funding.

Community Engagement

This pilot is called 'The Team around the community' bringing stakeholders and the community together so that the community could identify their needs, how these could be provided for, where the gaps are and what the priorities should be. One of the aims is to build and give the community a toolbox to enable them to continue responding after the VRU pilot has ended.

The team around the community was supposed to centre around the Hub, Meadow Rd Community centre, a youth centre just outside the St. James Ward. Whilst the Community Navigator's base would have been in the police station, the Hub would be the base for delivery of any work including any projects going on. Meetings, workshops and training would be delivered there so it would become the hub of information and how parents and young people could access services. This would enable the Community Navigator to have a presence in the community and build a relationship with local people, with ongoing dialogue. There were also plans to do leafleting in the area and have conversations with young people to encourage engagement. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to progress these plans because of Covid.

There is a clear recognition that it is vital to listen to the voice of the community and develop positive relationships and plans are in place for how the community and particularly young people will be engaged post lockdown.

Working with Stakeholders

Members of the network are beginning to develop effective working relationships. An example was given of liaison between the Community Navigator, a school and other stakeholders to address what support could be offered for a particular cohort of young people, alongside a police presence at the bus stations to prevent incidents and potential criminal exploitation.

The pilot is still very new in Dudley. Although only recently established it has made good progress in a short space of time, with an established group of people already in place to take the work forward and clear plans, particularly in relation to community engagement. An extensive training offer has been developed. The work in relation to raising the awareness of parents appears to have been particularly well received and is a model that could be adopted elsewhere.

4. Overall Findings

4.1 Impact and Progress

The communities in all of the pilot areas have high levels of trauma that will require input over a significant period of time to begin to bring about change. As a result of this and the influence of many interrelated factors, demonstrating and measuring the outcomes and impacts is highly challenging. The VRU projects are beginning to have an impact and progress is being made towards achieving the aims, however, this should be evidenced over a much longer period. There was widespread praise from both stakeholders and providers of the VRU's work, particularly around the development of a more collaborative whole-system approach with a clear focus on public health approaches. Some work was taking place prior to the VRU commissioning interventions in relation to violence reduction, but this tended to happen in an ad hoc way and was not focused and co-ordinated across the relevant area. The regular steering group meetings and communication with networks have provided a platform for exchange of information, mutual support, cooperation and collective action, clearly contributing to collective efficacy. The results of the place-based evaluation show that the VRU has been largely able to look at a local level, identifying needs and gaps in services and then commission services to meet these needs. Its status enables it to engage with and influence senior people in key organisations including local government. Its work has led to changes in thinking and the delivery of services. It has created a culture of greater openness and developed an environment where people feel more empowered to try new things, encouraging innovation.

The pilot areas differ in terms of the challenges they face which has an impact on the nature of the interventions. Whilst the underlying approach can be the same, limited resources

require flexibility and decisions to be taken in relation to priorities related to the area, including which services will be commissioned, which the VRU acknowledged and is in line with the theory of change approach.

The stakeholder networks are providing valuable opportunities, both formally and informally, for collaboration and partnership, bringing together local stakeholders who share the common goal of reducing vulnerability and violence among young people, improving life chances and enabling communities, families and individuals to become more resilient. There was a suggestion that prior to the networks these traditionally worked more in silos. The interviewed key stakeholders and providers stated how much they value the opportunities to meet on a regular basis to network, share expertise, learning and resources. The meetings appear to be strengthening community networks and promoting a shared understanding of the public-health approach and the local services available. This was evident in terms of signposting and referrals. The majority of the stakeholder networks have recently approved terms of reference, so they have clearly identified objectives and criteria to work within. As one provider admitted: *We have twice a month steering groups which at first I thought was overkill, but it's actually really good to understand a broader range of what services are out there for children and families and young people.*

The roll-out of ACEs and Trauma Informed Practice has led to the training of significant numbers of staff including 850 in one college, resulting in staff having a much better understanding of the challenges faced by children and young people. It has also led to significant changes in practices, including young people being provided with awareness-raising sessions, mentoring and counselling. 30 students had been supported to continue with their education following incidents which previously would have resulted in their exclusion. As well as the free training being provided through the pilot projects, there is now an extensive offer with details of training courses run by the various partners being shared, which has led to a significant upskilling of staff. This is leading to a change of culture within organisations with a number signing up to be trauma-informed organisations. There is a belief across all of the areas that developing trauma-informed communities, with parents, teachers, the police, social workers and health staff trained in ACEs awareness and trauma-informed practice and implementing these approaches could make a significant difference.

A programme of parenting sessions is also being rolled out, raising awareness amongst families of child exploitation and youth violence, how to spot the signs, respond appropriately and where to access support.

4.2 Key Levers

4.2.1 The Appointment of Community Navigators

One person described the Community Navigator's role as being to *co-ordinate, commission and connect*. A key part of the Community Navigator's role has been to establish the stakeholder networks. The significant role of the Community Navigators in acting as the catalyst in bringing parties together and *the glue* in the sharing of information, co-ordination of responses, identification of gaps in provision and the exploration of solutions was widely acknowledged. They have extensive experience and skills in community connecting, being able to broker conversations and help organisations to navigate the system, building and

nurturing relationships. They have played an essential role in taking forward the work in each area, building on each other's strengths and helping local people and organisations to know where to go for help. Training the Community Navigators as ACEs Awareness trainers using the 'train the trainer' approach has also helped to roll out ACEs Awareness training in most of the areas.

4.2.2 The Establishment of Stakeholder Network Groups

The establishment of the stakeholder network groups has enabled organisations with an interest in violence reduction to meet, share intelligence and develop plans together. It has helped organisations to develop a much better understanding of what support is available in their area, which has been particularly beneficial in knowing who to make referrals to. Services have become better inter-connected, creating a web of support and activities for young people.

Moving meetings online because of Covid has actually enabled more organisations to be able to attend. Having short (an hour), regular (initially weekly or fortnightly) meetings that do not require any travel has made it easier for individuals to prioritise attendance.

4.2.3 Funding Opportunities

The existence of new monies for work on violence reduction in each of the areas was very much welcomed. Although the amounts of money were relatively small, it was felt that these were a clear statement of intent and provided opportunities to fund key services and for new approaches to be tried. The funding has enabled local areas to identify key priorities, gaps in provision and services to be commissioned to meet these needs. Providers also appreciated the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process in relation to allocation of part of the budget.

4.2.4 Supporting Grass-roots Provision

The VRU commissioned projects from local grass-roots providers that were already working in the area, enabling them to 'hit the ground running', build on existing structures and trusted relationships and draw on knowledge from people embedded in the local area. A number of providers aimed to recruit staff and volunteers from the local area, recognising that these individuals already have the links and commitment to, and in some cases a real passion for the area. This approach also results in creating much-needed employment within the pilot areas. Commissioning local grass-roots providers also resulted in their other work in the area contributing to the VRU outcomes. The pilot work did not stand alone but was supported by the other work taking place in the area. Providing training to existing providers has also upskilled individuals and organisations that are already established in the area and which are more likely to be successful in engaging with local residents.

4.2.5 The Vital Role of Education Providers

It was clear that Schools and Colleges have a key role to play. This is sometimes the only safe space for children and young people. Teachers see children on a daily basis so may be able to recognise any changes in behaviour. If they are trained in ACEs awareness and trauma-informed practices, they are in a better position to recognise the impact of trauma and changes in behaviour and to refer individuals for mentoring, counselling and other specialist services they need. They are also able to disseminate information about events,

activities and resources offered by providers to their pupils. However, they need access to the necessary resources and interventions when required.

4.2.6 A Targeted Approach on Those Most at Risk

Developing a closer working relationship and through the sharing of information between organisations, particularly the police, schools and colleges, has enabled a targeted approach with a focus on those individuals that are most at risk. By coming together, it is more likely that appropriate interventions can be identified and put into place to prevent the individual getting involved in violence and criminal activity.

4.3 Barriers

4.3.1 Contextual Challenges

The context in which the VRU is operating in each of the places poses considerable challenges. There is extensive trauma in the communities covered by the VRU projects. These are areas of significant deprivation, poverty and inequality which have suffered from years of austerity and cutbacks, impacting for example, on unemployment, a reduced police presence and the closure of youth services. Many professionals talked of young people's lack of aspiration and opportunities. Some young people see criminality as their only route to achieving material gains. For others it is easier to go along with it than 'saying no'. Joining a gang can also be a way of trying to find a sense of belonging. There is a strong sense that young people are getting involved in violence at a younger age. More are carrying knives, often mistakenly feeling that this helps them keep safe. Knife-crime is a major concern and there have been serious incidents with stabbings as well as shootings in the pilot areas, but for some individuals concerns in relation to safety are also related to living in high-rise accommodation with the risk of arson attacks, with this having become a reality for some families.

The general perception is one of a lack of safety in communities with crime being widespread, and children and young people being vulnerable to being drawn in or just caught 'in the crossfire'. The researched areas must also deal with stigmatisation and negative narrations which may contribute to the feelings of hopelessness, passivism and disengagement.

The pressures on families are intense. Some parents, it was pointed out by interviewees, are doing their *best*, but they are working in two, three or even four jobs just to stay afloat or remain excluded from the work market. Issues of inequality and deprivation are at the heart of these communities.

4.3.2 Community Scepticism

Individuals in most of the areas have been given the opportunity at some point to fill in questionnaires giving their views about what is needed in their local community. However, this has resulted in huge scepticism as they rarely see their views acted upon in practice. They have experienced unfulfilled promises and witnessed many initiatives in the past, which have been short-term. Even if successful, these have then been curtailed when budgets have been cut.

4.3.3 Commissioning Processes

The VRU funding was welcomed, and the model of having two lots of local funding, one allocated at the start of the financial year for previously identified needs and one for needs that arise during the course of the year was seen as positive. However, there were concerns about the commissioning processes. Some providers felt they were given insufficient time in which to apply. It was also felt that the timescales made it difficult for the VRU to ensure that organisations being commissioned fit in with the VRU objectives and are fit for purpose, rather than just chasing the funding. Although local organisations helped to identify local priorities, local people themselves were not given the opportunity to be part of the process of identifying needs and how these could be met prior to commissioning priorities/decisions being made. Decisions were made late, creating difficulties in relation to delivering the services within the proposed timescales. Funding came in 'dribs and drabs' and did not give projects time to embed, looking instead for 'quick wins'. However, it takes a lot of time to build acceptance and trust and then the capacity and skills of those providing services. Considerable concern was expressed that funding for these pilots was short-term despite the concerns being a long-term problem. One provider said:

If you want to make an impact on any community it needs to be 2 years because 12 weeks, that's just hitting a piece of the ice-berg. There's a whole lot of trauma and a whole lot of history and all that needs to be dealt with.

Organisations working in these communities have seen many previous programmes that have not been given the time to deliver or have not been developed and built on. If funding is not guaranteed people do not tend to rely on the services, in case they are not there in six months' time.

One provider stressed the value of working with grass roots organisations that are embedded in communities, but highlighted the challenges for them when applying for funding:

They can't compete with the bigger ones. They can't show that track record. They can't create a theory of change. They're doing the work, they're doing the delivery. They can show you all the good work that they've done but in terms of that evaluation and in terms of all of that paper trail, monitoring, they're not robust enough yet to be able to do that.

4.3.4 Engagement with Local Communities

Some of the stakeholder networks are considering how to involve young people and parents, but the fact that this is only happening after the projects have started has left some local people feeling excluded and could impact on sustainability. There was a belief from a number of providers that attempts should have been made to involve local people from the beginning, not once the stakeholder groups have been established. Co-production and co-design at a much earlier stage, as well as co-delivery, could have a significant impact on the achievement of the outcomes. This was recognised by the Community Navigators and a different approach has been taken in the latest pilot in Wood End in Coventry. The reason for not involving local residents at the earlier stages in the researched localities has been attributed to the pandemic's effect, which prevented VRU from holding open events and engaging with local communities on the ground.

4.3.5 Impact of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter

Covid-19

Covid-19 has posed challenges for Community Navigators, stakeholders and providers. Community Navigators have had to work remotely, holding meetings online, including those of the stakeholder network and those that are new in post have not even met the majority of the key stakeholders. As one Community Navigator said:

There is an added value in being present and available in the locality and that has been missing, ... looking forward to the possibility of being able to walk around, attend events and meet people and start off spontaneous conversations about local community matters.

One described the challenge of maintaining the network, keeping connections alive as well as the purpose, identity and momentum. The most significant impact, though, was in terms of engagement with residents in the local community.

Covid-19 has inevitably presented considerable challenges to the service providers, preventing or delaying the start of some programmes and the cancellation of events, forcing activity (both support and training) online, closing venues that were not Covid-secure; reducing the numbers supported and prompting the need to target the most vulnerable. However, providers have been adaptable, innovative and creative in response. Wherever possible, services have found alternative ways of delivering their support. As well as transferring online, methods have included doorstep visits; distributing activity packs from car parks; using video and Instagram, setting up a YouTube channel with weekly episodes about violence reduction and gang membership which have been shared by young people on social media thousands of times. The same provider went out during lockdown and gave out PPE to young people who were out on the streets despite lockdown. Community Navigators have played an important role in facilitating the adaptation of services and responses.

Providers have shared staff and resources to address the difficulty of losing staff to sickness and having to isolate. Services have offered to share their Covid-secure accommodation. The stakeholder meetings also provided peer support for those working in diverse fields, but against the same back-drop of lockdown.

However, the reality is that much of the work taking place in relation to violence reduction is relationship-based and replicating this online has been challenging. Covid has posed particular challenges when new relationships are going to be or are being formed, as opposed to working with existing service-users. Engaging young people can be challenging regardless of the circumstances; moving activities online inevitably resulted in some youngsters dropping out of the programmes and made it almost impossible to establish relationships with new individuals. Not all individuals have felt comfortable engaging using virtual methods, discussing things online rather than face-to-face. Not everyone has access to digital media. Children have not necessarily had their own devices. Even when they have, they sometimes cannot find a quiet space in their home to be able to engage with a mentor or were concerned about their conversation being overheard. Schools moving to lessons online during lockdown meant less potential time for young people to socialise and to be

able to access online support offered by provider organisations. For some children a lack of routines or poor sleep patterns meant that children were just not ready to engage.

It is difficult to assess the impact of moving awareness sessions online. Whilst professionals will be used to attending face-to-face workshops and training sessions, parents may have less experience of engaging in this way. However, some parents and carers may have felt less intimidated by attending an online session where they can choose whether to actively participate or not, turning their camera and sound off if they prefer to just observe.

There were particular concerns about the impact that Covid has had on domestic violence.

Black Lives Matter

Black Lives Matter was described as acting as a stimulus to personal development, including seeking to better understand the experience of those who are black. Trying to challenge the narrative around perceptions and stereotypes of young black men who are involved in crime and making sure that people of colour within the network have the space to express their opinions were just two of the ways put forward, in which Community Navigators play an important role as well as specifics such as commissioning 'Stop and Search' training to ensure that young people know their rights.

Most of the providers discussed Black Lives Matter, if the young people they were working with raised this on a one-to-one or a group basis. Some organisations opened up conversations to help young people process and understand more. Whilst some providers described how they had reflected on their practice in relation to Black Lives Matter focusing specifically on trying to understand the lived experience of black youngsters and how they are responding to them, others acknowledged that they had not reviewed their approaches. Where this work was undertaken by providers it was not done under the auspices or banner of the VRU work. It was felt that the VRU could have taken more of a lead in the steering group meetings in encouraging reflection on this. Some providers felt that where it was discussed it was more from the perspective of the potential for violence as a consequence of demonstrations. Concerns were also expressed about the fact that materials given out in local communities by the police do not always represent the local community.

4.3.6 Measuring Success

There are many challenges to measuring the type of work being undertaken by the VRU, notably the fact that outcomes will not be seen for many years and it is difficult to attribute change achieved to any one intervention. Ultimately the success of the work may be judged on whether the level of violence reduces, but this may take 5-10 years. It was felt that what the community really wants is for their community anxiety to be lowered and to know there is a range of support available, if needed. It is very difficult to measure a reduction in anxiety. However, there were many ways in which it was felt that outcome and impact could be measured, both qualitative and quantitative including:

Quantitative: reduction in crime - a mapping of areas showing the exact location, time, number and nature of knife incidents, carrying weapons, anti-social behaviour, burglaries,

drug possession and dealing, incidents of violence and domestic violence, incidents involving the police (information which the police already collect), referrals to high-risk services over an identified period of time so any direct link to the work undertaken by the VRU-funded projects can be tracked; in schools and colleges Ofsted can assess a wide range of measures including improvement in school and college attendance and reduction in exclusions and NEETS (those not in education, employment or training); numbers engaging with programmes, employment rates, number of people whose lives have potentially been turned around, baseline screenings at the beginning and the end of interventions (e.g. as in the case of the Pupil Referral Unit), the networks that are built up, the amount of funding leveraged; self-ratings of knowledge and understanding pre and post courses and reach - number of individuals and organisations in contact with.

Qualitative: case studies describing the journeys of individuals and changes made in their lives; the voices of young people and families; children's and youngsters' attitudes, behaviour and performance in nurseries, primary and secondary schools and colleges; the growth of social investment; feedback from local residents over the period of time about how they feel about living in the area, whether they feel safer coming out of their homes and making use of facilities; feedback and evaluations from all the partners, stakeholders and participants in projects; measuring the general wellbeing of residents and reductions in mental health issues and anxiety.

One provider talked about the theory of change and how this could provide really good outcome measuring tools. However, they questioned whether it would be possible to make direct links between what is being done individually and collectively and whether this results in less violence and specifically knife crime. One of the participants raised the question: *Will there be less knives on the street or will they just be more hidden?* One interviewee talked about the fact that they had worked with one of the youngsters involved in a recent fatal stabbing two years previously. They thought at the time that their input had made a difference, but his engagement and his understanding of situations did not prevent him from wanting to be around gang members and still be vulnerable to manipulation by them.

4.3.7 Sustainability

To date funding has been provided to local organisations that can provide services in the area that contribute to violence reduction. It was suggested that alongside this approach small pots of money could be made available for individuals or small groups to apply for, to run events or sessions or creating new businesses, giving local residents the opportunity to develop their own ideas and initiatives. Prior to funding being offered to them, workshops should be run providing training on how to write funding submissions, project plan, run events, set up a business etc.

Engaging with key members of the local community is key in driving the work forward. Keeping the local stakeholder networks going was seen as essential in maintaining positivity and communication. Some areas will have existing community groups made up of local residents. If individuals from these groups are involved in the networks from the start, it is possible to begin to build in sustainability from the beginning. The steering group needs committed individuals who are willing to get to know local people, properly listen, are committed to staying and getting local people better connected to people who can help

them achieve what they want as a community. Efforts need to be made to find, nurture and cultivate the skills of local people and build capacity so there is a sense of ownership. But this has to be done at the start of the process not at the end. As one resident said: *Are you guys all just going to do all the work then just say, here you go, now you look after it, because people won't buy into it because it is something that has been done to them rather than for them.*

It was felt that it should be possible to identify a local provider or resident who would be willing to lead the stakeholder network in due course. However, it is important to make sure that individuals feel safe enough to take roles on, are given appropriate training (for example on writing funding bids and managing projects) and have access to ongoing support from the VRU and whatever resources are needed. This is far more likely to happen if individuals are involved from the beginning so that everything can be passed on and shared. It is important that there is funding available to support them in this role. It is not reasonable to expect individuals to undertake roles on a voluntary basis that have previously been undertaken in a paid capacity just because they are local residents. There are interesting models around communities of practice professionally which could translate onto communities.

By providing training on a wide range of topics related to violence reduction and particularly ACESs awareness and trauma-informed practices it should be possible to bring about sustained changes across organisations and across communities. Upskilling professionals and local people was recognised as an important part of sustainability and creating a legacy for the pilot.

5. Conclusions

The subsections below detail the key conclusions from the evidence presented in relation to each of the pilots, setting out the overall findings from the analysis.

Outcomes

The VRU pilot projects have taken place at a time of unprecedented challenges, with the pandemic impacting significantly on the ability of the projects to deliver the services that had been commissioned. Whilst they proved to be highly adaptable, they nevertheless were unable to deliver in the ways that had been planned. Some services had to operate virtually; others were delayed whilst some could not take place at all. In addition, it has not been possible for the pilots to engage with their local communities in ways they would have wished to. The pilots need a longer period of time to be able to implement the original proposals.

The nature of the interventions are such, that the outcomes may not be evidenced for a significant period of time. Early years intervention aimed at developing children's protective behaviours, for example, may result in an increase in the identification of safeguarding concerns, however, it will be a number of years before it is clear whether a child is better able to keep themselves safe. Appropriate outcome measures need to be introduced to better reflect the nature of the challenges and the interventions being implemented.

Community Navigators

The key role of the Community Navigators was widely accepted across the pilots. They were integral to developing the stakeholder networks, identifying gaps in provision, encouraging collaboration and identifying creative solutions to address the needs. However, the nature of the task requires longer-term input rather than a short-term piece of work. The Community Navigators are an extremely skilled and experienced group of people, however, it is questionable whether it is possible to establish a sustainable model of service delivery of this nature within such a short timeframe. The short-term nature of their contracts could lead to the loss of very competent individuals and there is a danger that this will have an impact on the success of the VRU work in the area going forward.

The Commissioning Process

As stated above, concerns were expressed in most areas about the commissioning processes. Timescales were short for submitting proposals and providers did not feel that they had the opportunity to develop their own solutions to meet the required needs. As a consequence some services that were commissioned could not fully meet the requirements whilst other more appropriate models of service delivery were not considered.

Longer-term Strategy

It was clear in all of the areas that whilst the pilots appear to be having a short-term impact, a longer-term local strategy was required with residents, stakeholders and providers coming together to set local priorities that meet over-riding strategic objectives. In each area there is a significant level of trauma that needs to be addressed and consideration needs to be given to tackling this, not just at an individual level but also at a community level. There is a

limit to what could be achieved or evidenced within the timeframe of the pilots. Longer-term investment is required in a range of provision to enable sustainable change to be implemented. There also needs to be strategic leadership. The one area that had a specific lead for youth violence prevention was clearly benefiting from this approach with the opportunity to broker relationships and navigate complex organisational structures.

Training

All of the pilot areas had introduced ACEs awareness and trauma-informed practice training. Feedback from a wide range of providers and stakeholders was very positive. It is too early to say the extent to which this approach will impact on the practices and culture within organisations; however, there appeared to be a real commitment from professionals to reflect on their policies and practices. It appeared that introducing ACEs awareness and trauma-informed practices training within schools, colleges, the police, health and social care staff and other providers could have a significant impact. The tertiary college, for example, that implemented this training, along with targeted mentoring and support, succeeded in keeping 30 students within the education system that would have previously been excluded because of their 'risky behaviours', preventing them from becoming more at risk of criminal exploitation.

Developing a Counter-narrative

Serious incidents receive significant media attention as well as wide dissemination on social media, contributing to the portrayal of the four pilot areas as dangerous places. Individuals in the areas feel strongly that a counter-narrative needs to be promoted, that presents young people in a more positive light, encourages people to feel safer in their local communities and enables young people to reclaim the areas where they live. This includes trying to improve the environment so that local people can take more pride and enjoyment in this. The experience of #OurHillfields demonstrated the value of such an approach.

A Chain/Menu of Provision

Hillfields was the one area that had a chain or menu of provision from early years through to adulthood. It was clear that each area would benefit from such an approach, being able to provide support services from pre-natal and early years through to young adults, with parental support available at every stage. However, it is recognised that limited resources will require each place to decide its local priorities based on the nature of the local community and the main causes of historical trauma, including levels of domestic violence. The success of individual projects will inevitably be impacted by the skills, experience and expertise of both the individuals and organisations delivering the services as well as the actual approaches used. The services that were particularly valued by local residents, providers and stakeholders included the following:

- Early years intervention
- Counselling and mentoring
- Diversionary Activities and Youth Engagement
- Safe Spaces
- Awareness raising with parents, young people, local communities and professionals, including child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, ACEs Awareness and trauma-informed practice.

- Support for Parents

Engaging Local Educational Establishments

It is vital that the local stakeholder groups are able to engage local educational establishments. Preventing young people from being excluded from school or college was seen as absolutely critical. Introducing ACEs Awareness and trauma-informed practice training for all staff and targeted mentoring for identified pupils and students was recognised as essential to prevent young people being on the street during the day and vulnerable to criminal exploitation. The transition to secondary schools in years 6-7 is a particularly critical period when youngsters may be exposed to older children, negative influences, a different physical space and a different journey to school. Specific support needs to be provided to enable this to be a smooth process.

Lived Experience

Across the pilots the voice of people with lived experience was considered to be very powerful, particularly in getting messages across to young people. Once young people are involved in gangs and criminal activity the most effective approach is likely to be engagement with individuals with lived experience of being a gang member, spending time in prison, being the perpetrator or the victim of knife crime and being involved in county lines.

There was widespread recognition of the value of lived experience in the delivery of programmes, for example, through sessions on knife-awareness delivered in schools and the delivery of mentoring by former gang members.

Safe Spaces

All areas need safe indoor and outdoor spaces that young people can go to out of school hours, where they can be themselves and find their own means of expression. In some areas buildings that were previously used by youth services or the local community have been closed down and it was felt that these could be re-opened and managed by local community groups and organisations. In others it was felt that organisations could be more accommodating in offering their facilities for use by local community groups and providers. Outdoor and indoor sports facilities are in particular short supply. It was felt that schools should be more willing to offer their facilities out of hours to local providers. The VRU could play a part in brokering these arrangements.

The Development of Trauma-Informed Communities

Parents and all staff working in nurseries, primary and secondary schools, health services, social care and the police should be offered ACEs awareness and trauma-informed practice training. The aim should be to develop trauma-informed communities.

Raising Awareness of Parents and Professionals

Raising the awareness of parents and professionals in a wide range of subjects was seen as important, including county lines, digital media, gang culture and violence, Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). It was felt that many parents are unaware of the nature of the activities that their children are involved in. Parents need to be given the tools and strategies to help them respond appropriately and to know where they

can turn for support. Feedback from parents attending courses was very positive, however, the number of individuals participating was limited. This may in part be due to digital exclusion, but efforts need to be made to explore how the reach can be extended.

The Provision of More Activities, Support and Mentoring

Many saw the provision of more activities for young people, especially in the evenings as important. Concerns were expressed about how youth work has 'disappeared' in recent years with significant cuts to youth services. There are not enough detached youth workers, youth clubs or grassroots youth work. There needs to be a wide range of diversionary activities so that there is something on offer for everyone including music, rapping, graffiti art, crafts, dance and sports. Free food is always an additional attraction in areas where food poverty is a significant concern. Young people need to have something to look forward to.

Organisations that provide activities are in a stronger position to provide coaching, mentoring and counselling, as relationships have been developed prior to providing more targeted therapeutic one-to-one support. There was considerable recognition of the need for all young people to have somebody who they trust and who they can go to, confide in and seek guidance from.

A number of providers stressed the importance of being available to provide support on an ongoing basis, rather than undertaking a time-limited piece of work with an individual or family and having time to develop relationships.

In view of the fact that some young people gravitate to gangs because they appear to provide a sense of belonging that might not be provided by their family, providers need to be able to try to replace this. Trust only comes over a period of time. It was also felt that young people and families need to be able to access support 24/7 (this is provided by some support providers).

Introducing a Wide Range of Approaches to Prevent Knife Crime

Knife crime causes particular concerns within communities. In addition to trying to develop young people's protective behaviours and the provision of mentoring and support for those most at risk, local residents were in favour of the following approaches. Knife arches were seen as an important tool in identifying individuals who are carrying knives and preventing them being taken into settings such as schools and colleges, enabling other students to feel safer. However, students are often made aware in advance that these will be put in place or they are brought in following specific incidents in the area. It was felt that they should be used more often, without warning. It was also suggested that there should be incentives/rewards to encourage young people to hand over weapons to the police with more regular amnesties. Awareness sessions on the impact of carrying knives and getting involved with gangs should be provided to children in both primary and secondary schools, from individuals who have suffered from knife crime, both perpetrators who have ended up in prison and victims and the families of victims. It was suggested that these should be provided as part of PHSE, with sessions delivered on a regular basis, with follow-up afterwards to reinforce the message.

Targeting Key Members of the Local Community

There were a range of views about which groups in local communities could be particularly helpful in getting messages out and helping to implement solutions. Local elders and community leaders were seen as important in areas where there are different ethnic groups. Women are often the carers and nurturers; they communicate with each other and share information. Engaging them is an opportunity to get to the 'heart' of the community. Many people will not come to a meeting, but they might engage in a craft or art session, where they have the chance to chat. The stakeholder network groups have tended to focus on the main providers in the area. However, violence impacts significantly on a range of organisations including shops, businesses and fast-food outlets. One provider described how their organisation had engaged in very effective scoping with 'the night-time economy' in another part of the country helping to establish a strong body of people committed to bring about change. Targeting a wider range of stakeholders could help to identify more appropriate local solutions.

Focusing on Early Prevention and Building up Resilience

There needs to be a focus on early childhood development, early prevention and building up of resilience. Health visitors can spot early-warning signs. Recognising the importance of the first 1,001 days of a child's life, it was felt that violence reduction work needs to be as early as possible and as universal as possible. Children from a very young age need to be supported in an age-appropriate way to increase their protective behaviours, learning what it means to feel 'safe' and what unsafe looks like so that violence and a sense of trauma do not become normalised. Comparisons were made to the work of the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) Pants project. They need to be supported to develop their sense of self-worth and self-esteem. This was recognised by many of the participants in the evaluation as being critical in addressing the risk of child exploitation, however, it was also recognised that it is difficult to evidence the outcomes of this work because of its long-term nature.

Targeting those Most at Risk

It was recognised that the police sharing intelligence about those most at risk, including the children and siblings of those in the criminal justice system, with schools and colleges and other key providers is an effective way of ensuring a more targeted approach. The aim has to be to break the cycle and prevent children growing up and going down the same path.

Providing more Employment Support and Opportunities

There is a belief that some young men feel that they are unable to earn money through employment, so their only option is to engage in criminal gang activity to be able to achieve the things they want. They need to have other ways of fulfilling their ambitions and routes into the job market.

Overall, the evaluation found that the place-based pilots have made good progress towards achieving the VRU outcomes in a short space of time, as one Community Navigator put it

adapting to the different demographics and character of communities whilst facing the unprecedented challenges of Covid-19.

6. Recommendations

Recommendations for the WMVRU are to:

- Consider extending the current place-based pilots:
 - to enable the engagement of a wider network of stakeholders
 - to enable the involvement of local residents in the development of the work
 - to enable the services to develop and deliver the services that were originally commissioned prior to Covid
 - to enable the services more time to evidence whether the outcomes are being achieved
 - to identify the learning that will influence future place-based initiatives.
- Recognise that the desired outcomes are long-term and will not be clearly evidenced within the timeframe of the pilots.
- Consider introducing outcome measures that reflect the challenges of evidencing change that may take some time to achieve.
- Employ Community Navigators on longer-term contracts which enable them to work in each area over a longer time period to enable them to embed the whole systems approach and develop a sustainable model of service delivery.
- Develop and implement commissioning processes that enable local areas (residents, providers and stakeholders) to identify their own solutions to meet their own local priorities within the overall outcomes required by the VRU. Achievable timescales to be set for submissions, with decisions made within agreed deadlines and allowing sufficient time for delivery.
- Recognise the need for a long-term strategy at a local level. Explore options in relation to the identification of a local strategic lead in relation to youth violence prevention and reduction.
- Consider ways to address the scale of trauma existing in certain communities and ways of developing trauma-informed communities.
- Consider ways in which a counter-narrative can be developed in communities that are perceived to be unsafe and violent.
- Encourage local educational establishments, at nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary levels to implement a range of approaches to violence reduction to prevent exclusion including:
 - Training all staff in ACEs awareness and trauma-informed practice

- Providing mentoring and counselling for those individuals considered to be most at risk
 - Providing safe indoor and outdoor spaces out of school hours
 - Providing support to enable the transition from years 6-7.
- Recognise the value of lived experience and explore ways of drawing on the experience of individuals in raising awareness and providing targeted mentoring and support.
 - Explore with young people in local areas how to make them feel safer so they do not feel that they have to carry a weapon to protect themselves, including ensuring that there are safe indoor and outdoor spaces.
 - Ensure that members of local communities are more integral to the VRU work in each area.

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