

West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit Evaluation

The Programme-level Evaluation



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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. VRU Update: Phase 2 Programme Level Evaluation Final Report | 3 |
| 1.1 Background..... | 3 |
| 1.2 Overview..... | 4 |
| 1.3 Data Collection Methods..... | 5 |
| 2. Findings | 7 |
| 2.1 Theme 1. Contextual Challenge | 7 |
| 2.1.1 Funding arrangements | 7 |
| 2.1.2 The Complexity of the System..... | 9 |
| 2.1.3 Fragmentation | 9 |
| 2.1.4 Private sector – the missing system? | 13 |
| 2.1.5 Crisis Context: The impact of Covid-19 | 14 |
| 2.2 Theme 2. Vision and Purpose..... | 16 |
| 2.3 Theme 3. Communication (And Commissioning)..... | 23 |
| 3. Conclusion..... | 30 |
| References | 32 |

1. VRU Update: Phase 2 Programme Level Evaluation Final Report

1.1 Background

The West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit (hereafter referred to as the VRU) was launched in the second half of 2019, with over £3 million Home Office funding (for 2019/2020). Its purview was to help reduce violence in the region through working across systems and with multiple stakeholders through a public health approach.

The initial evaluation started with a scoping exercise which led to the development of an evaluation framework covering four main work streams. Workstream 1 – A Rapid Literature Review of Previous Public Health Driven Violence Reduction Strategies; Workstream 2 – A Report of Stakeholder Interviews from the Programme Level of the VRU; Workstream 3 – A Report on the Place-based Pilots implemented in the early phase of the VRU; Workstream 4 – Development and Testing of a Data Platform.

This report is a follow up to the earlier Workstream 2 activity. The phase 1 report focused on exploring the levels of understanding of the VRU, its aim, approach and activities via a series of stakeholder scoping interviews. The initial aim of the interviews was to gain a fuller understanding of:

- The approach being adopted by the VRU;
- The roles and responsibilities of different actors within and around the VRU;
- The activities and projects being delivered by/through the VRU;
- The anticipated outcomes for the VRU, at system and project level.

The interviews explored the following research questions:

- How do different stakeholders understand the approaches which underpin the WM-VRU strategy?
- What roles and responsibilities do different stakeholders hold within the VRU? Is there a common understanding of these? How well are they currently perceived to be working together?
- What are the different activities and projects currently being delivered by/through the VRU? How have these been selected? How are they going so far? What do they hope to achieve?
- What are the anticipated outcomes for the VRU, at systems and project level?
- What evidence/data already exists which could help to assess achievements against these outcomes?
- In addition, the timing of the interviews allowed for the inclusion of a specific focus on the VRU's response to Covid-19, and reflections of the implications of Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matters Movement for the VRU's current and future work.

1.2 Overview

In phase 2 we sought to draw on and further some of these discussions alongside pursuing some new lines of investigation now that the VRU has entered its second year. We returned to interview key members of the VRU team and key stakeholders to ascertain reflections on the programme delivery to date to understand key relationships, capacity, and outcomes/impacts. In phase 1, the Programme Level evaluation sought to place all activity within the framework of the broader VRU objectives and capacity, in order to understand the contribution of all elements of the work. It was also intended that this element would investigate how the VRU has changed and developed in terms of capacity and capability and what the impact of COVID 19 been on strategic activity and delivery. In phase 2 we were guided by the same impetus and aims. In addition, we wanted to establish how any initial learning had been taken forward and to consider some of the emerging lessons being learned as the programme was being embedded across the region.

In order to understand the starting point for this phase of the research, it is necessary to recap some of the key findings from the earlier phase with a sample of participants close to the centre of the VRU. In Phase 1, the findings presented focused on seven main themes:

- Aims and Approach;
- Continuity and Change;
- Systems and Stakeholders;
- Outcomes and Impact;
- Making Progress;
- Crisis Context;
- Fundamental Tensions.

Our work sought to build on this foundation, exploring similar themes in our interviews with a sample less closely linked to the day-to-day delivery and implementation of the VRU, but nonetheless central to its successful delivery (see below). At the design phase we set out the themes we wanted to explore. These included:

- The evolution of the approach being adopted by the VRU and how the whole system is piecing together
- An updated analysis of the roles and responsibilities of key actors within and beyond the VRU
- A refreshed look at the activities and projects being delivered by and through the VRU and what priorities have changed and continued
- Whether a refining of the anticipated outcomes of the VRU at project and place level has been required and, if so, why/why not

We will also consider the new themes around:

- How and where the VRU sits and engages with key strategic partners.

- The relationship between the VRU with Statutory and Local Authorities
- How does the theory of change fit in with the programme?

As the research consolidated and in response to our emerging findings, we have condensed the themes we intended to explore and the themes previously explored in phase 1 into three main overlapping and interlinked key areas:

1. Contextual Challenge (which corresponds to earlier themes around Systems and Stakeholders, Fundamental Tensions and Crisis Context)
2. Vision & Purpose (which corresponds to earlier themes around Aims and Approach; Continuity and Change)
3. Communication (which corresponds to earlier themes around; Outcomes and Impact, Making Progress)

As the research developed the themes and issues amended and we have organised these new themes around a series of new subsections (see below).

The aim of this strand of the evaluation is still to analyse how the programme level is situated alongside the project level and place level elements and to understand their contribution to the overall VRU objectives. This will help the VRU and its partner agencies across the wider education, employment and health economies to collectively clarify what key questions are being addressed, how they are expressed as deliverables, and how to deliver significant change and impact, and inform future commissioning decision making. The findings and report from this element of the evaluation will contribute to informing a framework that enables the VRU and its stakeholders to develop measurable indicators, define outputs (products and services), monitor processes, and evaluate the differences that community-based interventions are making, and where possible how much change has occurred.

1.3 Data Collection Methods

The research team undertook semi-structured, qualitative interviews with stakeholders who had been identified by the VRU programme team. Interviewees were selected on the grounds of their role in the VRU either as key partners or as part of the programme delivery team. Whilst the phase 1 interviews were shaped by the emerging impact of COVID-19. In this phase we concentrate on how thinking and action has changed in the intervening period.

The research team completed 17 interviews during January to March 2021. The interviewees were selected by the VRU and are individuals representing broader agencies. The sample was generated by the VRU and shared with the research team in December 2020. It aimed to develop the Phase 1 sample and to reflect the changing personnel at the Programme Level. It also brought in new voices into the overall evaluation. In this sense, the sample was shaped by purposive, criterion sampling (Patton, 1990). The participants were

purposively selected on the grounds that they were likely to be able to provide information-rich responses to the organisation of the VRU due to being part of the programme architecture.

The sample was skewed towards participants from organisations directly involved in the Criminal Justice System (e.g West Midlands Police, Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, Crown Prosecution Service, and the Youth Justice System) or agencies closely who's activities would be closely aligned to a (criminal justice) violence agenda (perpetrators and/or victims). The remainder was made up form organisations involved primarily from Education and Tier 2 public health, diversionary activities. Whilst organisations in the latter group may have had a broader remit, the interviewees were primarily focused on the delivery of diversionary or preventative serious violence reduction interventions.

In December 2020 we were handed the list of suggested interviews by the VRU executive. Many participants had a regional remit e.g (Police, OPCC, CPS, NHS England, NHS Improvement for the Midlands, Midland Sports). The remainder of the sample was more limited in geographical scope.

In February 2021, we were given a second wave of participants to interview. Here we again decided to apply a purposive criterion sample to include participants from a broader array of policy areas and at different strategic levels. The idea was to 'maximize variability' in order 'to discover whether the program succeeds across a whole spectrum of sites' (Weiss 1998) In this sense we also began following the principles of realist sampling (Emmel, 2013), whereby we as evaluators sought to become knowledgeable and familiar with the potential advances and pitfalls of a programme through conversations with front line practitioners and policy makers. We held interviews with at least one representative from all local authority areas with the exception of Dudley. We have taken necessary steps to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of our participants

Our findings have been supplemented from other areas of activity across the evaluation consortium, which have allowed us to build and generate our understanding of the evolution of the VRU in the West Midlands. It was at this juncture we were satisfied that we could start to explain how the VRU programme was working and for whom and in what contexts. It is important to stress that in the research process we, as researchers, have adopted a teacher-learner role and the research act is typified by teacher-learner cycle (Pawson, 1996; Manzano, 2016). In this sense our interviews were iterative as we incorporated emerging learning into our discussions as the research progressed. The aim was for increasing (but not total) clarity on the administration of the programme, which we achieved through combining data from other sources on the subtleties and intricacies of the natural setting (Emmel, 2013). In our case, this primarily entailed cross-referencing the findings of earlier phases and from the emerging findings of the broader evaluation of which this report is one component.

2. Findings

2.1 Theme 1. Contextual Challenge

There was a clear sense from those we interviewed that the VRU team and programme, faced significant challenges as a result of contextual complexities. Whilst there was widespread recognition of both the importance of the mission and the commitment of the VRU team, stakeholders frequently pointed to a series of challenges which presented hurdles for engagement and delivery, and potentially impacted upon programme success. The main challenges, in no order of importance, concerned:

- Funding arrangements
- The complexity of the system
- Crisis context

The issue of funding was one of the short-term arrangements in place, versus the longer-term goals of reducing violence using a public health approach. The complexities of the system concerned the nature and variety of the stakeholders engaged with the violence reduction in the West Midlands. The crisis context related to the current pandemic and delivering a violence reduction strategy amid a global pandemic. It should be reiterated that stakeholder reflection on the above challenges seldom indicated any criticism of the VRU itself, but rather highlighted the challenges that the entire System, including the VRU, faced in delivering against programme objectives. Each challenge is considered in further detail below.

2.1.1 Funding arrangements

In the first phase of the evaluation, a fundamental tension was highlighted between the VRU's long term ambition and the short-term funding model. This tension continues to be a concern for stakeholders, a number of whom regarded the current funding arrangements as running counter to the 'whole systems' approach. As one participant put it, *'the system isn't helping the systems approach'* (P16). The short-term nature of the funding was identified as both hampering consistency and creating a sense of uncertainty. In part, this was regarded as being detrimental to establishing and sustaining effective relationships, between agencies and with communities and individuals, to enable change across the System. Shifts in staffing resulting from short term employment contracts posed a particular challenge in terms of loss of knowledge and experience and building and maintaining trust and credibility. This was a recognised occurrence at both at both VRU and provider levels:

"There's just been a changeover of staff (at the VRU) so I think there's been a, there's that inconsistency of I suppose of teams that might be the challenge, because you can do a whole piece of work around systems change and then it changes when a full team changes" (P16).

"The thing you want to change is the system and the approach. However, what you need then is the people who are activating the change, and with a one year regime you lose your good people. You need to start again and actually we sometimes are not able to do achieve

the traction. And then in terms of your programmes there's some projects that you can run over a year but then many more that actually you will need more than a year to set up properly, allow to run, properly evaluate, and so that you can then make a determination as to what you've learned and whether these are things that need to be mainstreamed and sustained" (P11).

There was also therefore a sense that short termism may hamper a considered approach to commissioning and inhibit providers' ability to respond to funding calls and deliver services and interventions in a meaningful way. Unrealistic timeframes for working up bids and planning, delivering and evaluating activity were the source of considerable frustration. The impact of late calls for funding bids were highlighted as a particular obstruction for community organisations, and potentially damaging to the relationship between organisations and the VRU. As one participant suggested,

"(community organisations) either can't respond, or they try and respond, and they respond and think they've done an okay job, submit it, and if they don't get the money, the VRU says, "You haven't been successful," they go, "Well, that was because you did it on such a short turnaround," and it probably just annoys them, to be honest" (P6)

The need to move away from short term funding, both of the VRU and the services they commission, was seen as being required to ensure that there was adequate space to develop the evidence base, avoid a 'hit and miss' approach to commissioning and support the sustainable development of service provision.

"(short term funding) doesn't give the VRU the time to be able to develop those approaches and a good example of that is, we may have just at the onset of a summer, a diktat that says, "Here's some resource over the summer for you to do engagement activities". But, we've got no time to prep for that and work with the relevant partners. So, that's a bit of a challenge I think and that's almost the reason why the hit and miss approach – well, I call it the "hit and miss", others probably won't call it "hit and miss" but that's why I think it's a hit and miss approach at the moment. Some things work really great, other things we're having to stop, pause, reinvent, redevelop, go back to the drawing board" (P6).

"yet again it's short term funding, we still don't know what's going to happen. We've got underwritten funds for quarter one, don't know what's going to happen after that, so how can we begin to plan for the long term outcomes that will measure over a three year period what difference this has made, over and above anecdotal? Or will I be sat here in three years' time writing bids again?" (P14)

Recommendation 1

Continue to seek ways to address apparent tension between the long-term ambitions of the VRU and the short-term nature of funding. This could include:

- Influencing Up: Using evidence from the evaluation to provide a rationale to the Home Office for longer-term settlements.

- Influencing Down: Adopting creative, collaborative and flexible ways to enable providers to work to delivery outcomes within the constraints of the funding model.
- Consider whether commissioning services ‘in principle’ for longer periods would provide greater assurance to providers.

2.1.2 The Complexity of the System

The complexity of the System itself was identified as a second key challenge. Core to this, was the acknowledgement of the scope the VRUs mission and challenge of working towards systems change amidst a ‘maze’ of stakeholders who may or may not intuitively recognise their place in the violence reduction agenda. The complexity of operating in a context of ‘systems within systems’ was discussed within the evaluation report for phase one, and there was strong evidence to suggest that this continues to represent a significant challenge for the VRU, local authority areas and individual agencies, as they seek to work towards systems change. In what follows, stakeholder reflections on the complexity of the system have been abstracted to three further sub-themes, namely:

- Fragmentation
- Engaging partners and negotiating partnerships
- Private sector – the missing system?

2.1.3 Fragmentation

We explore issues around whole systems and public health approaches subsequently. A key finding from the earlier phase of the evaluation was that the value of identifying key individuals to adopt and ‘own’ the agenda within these different systems and places was supported. It was reported, for example, that a director of violence prevention had been appointed within the NHS in London and this was seen as a valuable model, encouraging ownership of the agenda amongst key actors within the system. The importance of engaging with and building governance structures which bring key players around the table was seen to be of paramount importance. As the project has evolved, this is still the case, but it has presented a challenge around who should be round the table as the ‘networks are so complex, so fractured’ (P9):

“And the other part of this, you know, so schools as well, again, fundamentally importance of what they should be doing, they are the frontline, in essence, they are there, you know, kids coming into schools etc. etc. But again, disintegration of the schooling system, so you know, previously you go to the director of education in the local authority, and levers were pulled, and you know, the whole system kind of responded. And now you’ve got kind of free schools, foundation schools, whatever schools, the different kind...a complete dog’s breakfast of a system that you can’t pull any levers to get anything to happen. So there’s a kind of a real dilemma of how to corral all those different players together to actually make that difference (P10).

The challenges are particularly acute, it seems, in specific sectors. Taking the example of education, the participant went on to note:

So even in Birmingham, even in a smaller local authority, Walsall or any other local authority, you have to have, or be able to get the whole mass of that schooling system to be able to work together to address some of these fundamental issues, because quite a lot of these, as I said, have urban street gangs' territorial base is based on geography. So you know, you might be able to intervene, or one school might sign up and say, "Yeah, yeah, absolutely, I get this," headteacher, you know, behind all this, and you get a neighbouring school that there's none of that, but you're only addressing one part of the problem that isn't being addressed everywhere. So it doesn't matter how much interventions you put into that school, one school, their nemeses on the other side haven't had those interventions, so if they escalate, the other school that has the intervention will also escalate. So you're kind of in a cycle of violence, where you can't break it because you haven't got both intervention, you haven't got the whole intervention of that cycle to be able to break that cycle. So it becomes really difficult in that circumstance" (P10).

Similarly:

The challenges are things like, ...who do you put round the table to represent the NHS? Who do you put round the table to represent schools? You just can't. Those networks are so complex, so fractured, that that's an issue. And we have a ...complex patchwork of CCGs, we've got big provider trusts, and just corralling that is a big part of our role, as the role of VRU, is simply liaison in other networks. Which is fair enough, but it doesn't feel like a very active resource if part of the role is simply just helping people talk to each other and come up with a common position. But that overhead is kind of inevitable, I would suggest. (P9)

The fragmentation of the system leads to difficulties in understanding it fully. In some ways this absence of full understanding mirrors the issues we experienced in sampling a participant group and trying to avoid inherent criminal justice bias. These issues though were also acknowledged by our participants who were unclear of whether the VRU system was a criminal justice led or health led initiative:

I suppose one of the questions in my head is, you know, for them, how long has it taken them to understand the system, you know, because my experience of criminal justice, it's fairly complex, it's another language that we have to sort of get our head around. So I suppose, do they understand the system, how far does that go? And I suppose, are they part of the criminal justice system? So are they trying to influence the system they're inside? Or are they outside of the criminal justice system trying to influence the system from the outside? Because I don't know whether they are...are they a health unit or are they a criminal justice unit, or are they a sort of a blend, a hybrid of the both? I think...are they trying to influence the system by investment? (P3)

There was a sense that significant resource was being expended on administering the system, but the extent to which that was and should be necessary was the source of debate:

Are they [VRU] trying to use their resources to influence/improve/streamline, connect the system differently, you know, what are they trying to do? And I suppose that.. point probably is, given, you know, the things we've talked about, is their strategy refined enough, and have

they got the sort of...the courage to address areas of the system, and I suppose potentially the clout to address those areas of the system. Because you could turn round and say, "Well the last thing the system needs is another bureaucratic body to add another layer to things," you know, being cynical. But then what you do need potentially is someone that can streamline the process and be a body that can connect effectively to other partners, and get the intervention or resource on the ground in the right way and the right areas as quickly as possible. Which I think they've tried to do, and they recognised they had to build up some of the locality and place-based structures (P3)

Engaging partners and negotiating partnerships

The fact that the system is complex and that involves a plethora of different agencies from across seven different Local Authority areas lead to further questions about how participants understand their place and how the VRU understand the input of the component parts and whether the right people are around the table and how partnerships can be sustained. Here as in much of our findings we found contradictory statements. On the one hand we had participants recognising that bringing people together was a challenge in itself, but one the VRU has started to address:

"I suppose the core input of who turns up, then yes, good. The willingness to engage in the sense of the input measure of are we getting representation? Yes, we are, from the obvious and important key partners, yes, we are" (P9).

But on the other hand, there was a sense that this was not a complete task:

"I think that's where the VRU have been a bit naïve; they've got the right sectors in, but I don't think they've really appreciated how complex and big those sectors are. So it's no good just saying you've got health in – how is that going across all of health? But also, even then at a local level, what's happening locally? So they're trying to drive the agenda, and I think it needs to be much more of a partnership approach" (P7).

"Have we got it right, is probably another question in terms of who's sat around the table and we're currently even reviewing that and looking at that as we move forward, you know is it the right set of partners that we've got currently? So, obviously you could include ambulance services for example will probably have a role to play somewhere around that as well. But, I would say health colleagues, probably health colleagues, the CCG, local authority, police, the PCC's office, the combined authority. Education is absolutely key but does that come as part of local authority? Some of it does, some of it doesn't. There's university and college that doesn't always sit with the local authority and then you've got all the other linked key safeguarding processes that sit outside of say the local authority infrastructure, So, it's a longwinded way I suppose... of trying to allocate and plot the different stakeholders because I think they sit across the various layers of the VRU (P6)".

The pervading sense that the system has not been fully plotted and mapped is a theme that ran throughout our interviewees and sits across a number of our themes. For current purpose, it did present two immediate issues. Firstly, about how to secure engagement of

diverse groups with competing needs and agendas and secondly about recognising the fundamental need to negotiate in this space:

In terms of, you know, the VRU's work launched with quite a lot of fanfare, and the expectation, I think, that everybody right at the top of every organisation had to be involved. That just doesn't work; you can't ask people at the top of every single organisation that's relevant to this agenda to always be the ones that turn up to the meetings. So I think there's going to be a sort of settling over time of...a measure of very strategic level participation by a few people, and then a kind of broader operational network that kind of does the doing, I would say. I mean, [NAME WITHHELD] point is spot on about the NHS; I mean, kind of the game really here is finding ways to make a public health agenda part of the public health agenda, if you follow me, in the sense that the NHS resources, NHS planning, NHS service provision, NHS commissioning has this built into their agendas in the same way that we want to see in policing and local authorities and education, criminal justice". (P9)

The participant goes onto note:

I think there are...our engagement with the third sector is always going to be really complicated, because they're frustrated by how we work in the sense of the annual funding cycle, because they can't plan, which is the same position we're in, but they find it difficult to plan" (9)

The balancing act for the VRU is, then, is to understand the pressure on providers who are often competing for the same pots of money to deliver their services. But the VRU have to coordinate this across a complex region. This will require some expenditure on bureaucracy, but not too much as to call into question its legitimacy. There was also a sense of unease across the region as to what activities take place elsewhere and why:

"So, I think it's a little bit – not confused, the "confused" is not the right word but it's in a space where it's evolving and trying to mature. So, this is where I will criticise the contribution of the local authority, so criticising us collectively. Not necessarily Birmingham but local government collectively. So, we're all great in terms of turning up to a meeting and making sure that conversations are being had. But, how well do we align our teams and our processes to the actual workings of the VRU, being that key partner for its development, how well is that aligned? And, I would say in Birmingham we're beginning to do that really well by aligning our operational activity with the VRU and we seem to have that seamless relationship with them. In other areas, I'm not quite sure because I'm not responsible for other areas. But, having said that, I still think there's more we can do to make sure that the VRU can be as effective as a tool. So, not necessarily seeing it as a partnership board on its own or – it's not even a board, as a partnership unit that we all contribute to, but actually seeing it as an integral part in the way we, in the way that we deliver our service and seeing them as an internal part of that as well. You know it's a bizarre way of saying a partnership arrangement also being an internal arrangement, simply because I think whilst we've got to deal with violence in the city, the VRU is holding some of the governance structure around that. So, not trying to tie it in to some of our processes is not going to make us effective and it's not going to make the VRU as a collective effective"(P6).

Recommendation 2

Undertake mapping exercise of the whole system. This should reflect both local and regional landscapes to enable agencies to locate themselves and partners within the system, and identify opportunities for collaboration and sharing of good practice.

2.1.4 Private sector – the missing system?

Although not widely reported by participants, an interesting reflection emerged in relation to the “untapped potential” (P9) of the private sector. Whilst involving business may be seen to add an additional layer of complexity within an already crowded system, its absence arguably belies the sector’s position within the community infrastructure and its potential role in violence reduction.

There was suggestion that the VRU’s task of understanding the role of the private sector had begun, but that the potential here hadn’t yet been fully explored. Existing pockets of engagement with larger commercial organisations do exist within the region, including private sector financial investment in drug related interventions and support for the rehabilitation of offenders through employment programmes. Yet, questions remain in relation to the nature of any broader engagement that may be sought and the means through which this could be achieved.

“I don’t think we’ve kind of tapped into that kind of market, into the private sector in a systematic-wide basis, but we are doing bits and pieces that could be built upon to show how the private sector can support the interventions that we’re doing, and everybody’s in it together” (P10).

Encouraging businesses to see themselves as an integral part of the local ecosystem, and as having both a commercial and ethical stake in violence reduction was a key point of reflection here, with the same participant noting,

“there is a real issue here in terms of the stake of private businesses into their communities, and seeing that as part of their responsibility and their written power, to say that, “Look, we are here as part of the community; we might be doing business, we might be a huge global company, but we know that, you know, our shops and our warehouses and our offices etc. are part of that community infrastructure” (P10).

There is a task for the VRU in terms of continuing to explore potential for developing private sector involvement in the violence reduction agenda and examining the levers that might exist to promote engagement.

Recommendation 3

Synthesise the existing knowledge base and local learning in order to establish a clearer picture of:

- the nature of role that private sector can and should play within the violence reduction agenda
- the levers available to promote engagement

2.1.5 Crisis Context: The impact of Covid-19

The prolonged state of crisis experienced over the past twelve months featured strongly in participants' reflections on the development of VRU activity. The inequalities and injustices highlighted by both Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement were seen by many to have underscored the urgency of delivering on violence prevention and reduction. There was no sense that the VRU's overarching mission had in any way been diminished by the challenges presented by Covid-19. Instead, we found broad recognition that the intensification of some forms of violence and violence related activity during this period, had served to reaffirm the need for a robust, collective response.

There was widespread recognition amongst those interviewed, that the VRU's approach over the previous twelve months had been instrumental in enabling commissioned services to adapt to a significantly changed environment. This had provided the space and in some instances the support necessary to modify their activity. The VRU may wish to reflect upon the extent to which they have been able to achieve the appropriate balance between the need to support organisations, maintain relationships and keep abreast of the detail regarding the delivery of funded activity, as the extract below illustrates,

"My sense is that they have been incredibly supportive and understanding of all the providers' challenges, particularly health. I've felt very well supported by them and their acceptance that what we said we would do has had to change over the last 12 months. So, I think they have been very supportive, whether they've dug in to the detail of that, I haven't felt like they have for me, but I think that's been really helpful, they've just trusted me to say, "We could do this but we couldn't do this and it's meant this". So, I think that has been helpful" (P13)

The challenges experienced during the Pandemic have indeed been significant. Ultimately, the fact that the onset of Covid-19 has coincided with the VRUs existence has meant that the programme that has been delivered does not perhaps reflect the one which was envisaged at the outset. As one participant put it, many of the identified areas of activity simply '*disappeared overnight*' (P1). The impact has been far reaching. Closures and restrictions have led to the refocusing and at times pausing of planned activity. There has been fundamental change to the working practices of Housing Officers, Social Workers, Youth Workers and Teachers, as their delivery has shifted to online communication platforms rather than face-to-face interaction. Freedom to work collaboratively within and across organisational boundaries has also been hampered by a lack of face-to-face contact; the perceived benefit of 'coffee break conversations', particularly within the context of multiagency meetings, was a shared point of reflection. Crucially, there was a broadly held view that there had been a particular challenge in maintaining the engagement of parts of the Health system, something that was recognised as particularly problematic given the centrality of the Public Health approach. Whilst it is important to note that, as indicated in

the previous section, this was not attributed entirely to the Pandemic, it was clearly understood that capacity to commit resource had necessarily reduced during this period.

Despite this significant challenge, the opportunity for innovation brought about by the Pandemic and the importance of recognising the advances made during this period, also featured strongly in stakeholder's accounts. For some, the crisis situation had necessitated new ways of working which had served to galvanise partnerships. Where there had previously been a lack of incentive or even resistance to working together, the urgency of the challenges posed by Covid-19 had propelled action. One participant reflected on their experience of the increased ease with which information had been shared between agencies,

"Covid, if anything, has made information sharing a little bit more easy...I think that's because we are in a situation where needs must and we just have to get on with it and find a way of making it work" (P5)

Another remarked on the 'levelling' impact of the Pandemic within their own area of work.

"with Covid, because it was completely new for everybody, for the first time ever, it put head teachers and principals from nursery right through to post-16 in the same position" (P12)

Here, the Pandemic was seen as having produced opportunities for dialogue and learning across contexts, which hitherto had proved elusive due to siloed working.

What emerged across the interviews was general sense that the system had performed well given the multiple challenges it had faced, and a desire to capture the achievements that had been made during this period. One participant pointed to the need for the VRU and others within the system to clearly articulate their contribution to suppressing the unrest that may have manifest as a result of the pressures of lockdown,

"I think the police and all the agencies around it have done a pretty good job of it not kicking off on a significant scale, given, you know, anti-lockdown, pressures on people's mental health, people just being generally...probably heightened levels of anger at certain points during the last year, just because of the environment and the situation we're in....And hopefully, you know, the VRU can sort of, I suppose, put a bit of a line in the sand and say, "This is what we did during that time." (P3)

A final and important theme of discussion orientated around the extent to which the Pandemic had changed the landscape in which the VRU operated. It was observed that the Pandemic had given rise to new behaviours which needed to be understood and responded to. The pandemic was described by one participant as acting as a 'pressure cooker' which suppressed some violent activity and drove others out of view. The impact of this was felt to be something that was yet to be seen in its entirety and may only fully emerge in the longer term. This suggests a need for the system to remain vigilant and to continually review the understandings which underpin practice across the system.

Taken together, the funding arrangements, the complexity of the system and the ongoing Pandemic present a formidable challenge for the VRU. The context in which it operates is beset with challenge and it is necessary to understand the remaining discussion within this report within this context. It is recognised that much of this challenge is outside the direct control of the VRU, however it is hoped that the recommendations that are contained within the report offer some assistance in navigating this environment and mitigating some of the risks that are faced within it.

Recommendation 4

Take into consideration the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on delivery when assessing whether to re-commission services for financial year 2021 – 2022

Recommendation 5

Work with partners to keep understandings of the nature of violence/violence related activity under review as the region moves out of lockdown.

2.2 Theme 2. Vision and Purpose

In the first phase of the evaluation, participants close to the day to day administration of the VRU reflected on the issue of continuity and change in violence reduction initiatives in the region. The key issues here were the recognition that the VRU was not starting with a blank canvas and that there was already credible activity taking place in this space such as the work of the Violence Prevention Alliance and the Gangs and Violence Commission. It was also indicated – from those close to the VRU – that it added to and even consolidated these initiatives. There was a sense from our research too that the VRU was able to establish and enhance connections to people and initiatives in a way which had hitherto proved elusive. They had not been mobilised in quite the same way through previous initiatives.

One year on and violence is still regarded as an enduring issue particularly within urban areas which requires a multifaceted response. There was broad recognition across the stakeholders that no one agency could ‘solve’ the problem and a collective effort is required - drawing upon the different expertise and resource of individual agencies. The VRU, therefore, represents a *current manifestation* of the collective effort to tackle the issue drawing on the platform of the previous initiatives that sought to create partnerships and establish a programme of work informed by a Public Health approach to violence reduction. Participants also noted that pre-existing activity located within individual agencies/service areas and those developed at a local level (LA) had also had a positive impact and generated learning. Overall, there was a general sense that the violence reduction agenda was already recognised as an important area of focus.

“I think you had here, in the West Mids, you had a kind of sense that we understood this agenda, but the resource for it, the kind of rigour around the structure and the requirements of it wasn’t as strong as perhaps it is now with the VRU” (P9) .

Notwithstanding this sense of continuity, the VRU was increasingly regarded as a significant policy development signalling a step change with previous initiatives. There was widespread

recognition amongst stakeholders that the national prioritisation of violence reduction through additional central Government funding was seen to provide legitimisation for existing activity and opportunity for its strengthening and expansion. This provided impetus. So, whilst previous local violence reduction initiatives had enabled the violence reduction agenda to progress, the precarious nature of funding arrangements (largely grants from mainstream Police budget) was regarded as having hampered sustained progress. The positioning of violence reduction as a policy focus through the creation of multiple, centrally funded, VRUs, was seen to have particular value in this regard. As one participant noted, the escalation in available resource had both encouraged stakeholder buy-in, and created an opportunity for a 'critical mass' around the broad agenda which had the potential to sustain violence reduction as a policy feature:

"from our perspective, we see the objective of the VRU as the kind of ratification and expansion of that programme that existed before, supported by additional external resources, and put on a more, hopefully permanent basis by an enduring national recognition of the importance of violence reduction" (P9).

The participant went on to elaborate that:

"the issue of violence reduction being identified at the national level as a priority is clearly significant, and the escalation in the level of resource that's made available naturally shapes behaviours among partners who are interested in this agenda. The kind of rigour that the creation of a...network of VRUs (which) themselves are recognisable as the same as each other, also means that you have something closer to a kind of – you know, a cliché – but a kind of critical mass that says, "Here is a place where the agenda associated with violence reduction is understood, developed, evaluated, researched, compared," and that then gives greater legitimacy, one hopes, over time, to putting this on something like a permanent footing" (P9)

It was clear then that the link between the VRU and central government had also offered new opportunities for local experience/evidence to feed into regional and national policy debates. The relationship between the VRU, Home Office and other regional/national stakeholders was seen to provide a channel through which local providers could flag issues which potentially have a regional or national relevance or require a higher level strategic responses through established regional or national relationships and powers. For example, one participant reported having observed that the VRU has "a really good route into the Home Office" and "better clout" with some larger regional public bodies. This had encouraged the reporting of issues that had felt "too big" to tackle locally and requiring broader policy change.

We should, however, note an element of caution in relation to managing the continuity and change. Recognising there is a need to identify where existing knowledge and practice exists and build upon it rather than 'reinvent the wheel'. So although a centralised expansion of funding and raising of the profile of violence reduction, through public health means was important, there are still tensions in how this is understood and the added value the VRU brings:

“so some of the legacy work that came out of the initiatives you’ve just described, I think has been picked up by the VRUs. So we have certainly championed the sort of Violence Prevention Alliance work....(but) I’m not sure that we haven’t lost track of some of the good work that’s gone on and we’ve lost some of the organisational memory of the good work that’s happened” (P1).

Indeed, the issue of presenting programmes of work as ‘new’ when they are seen, to varying degrees, to mirror existing activity, was considered both frustrating and detrimental to those who access provision:

“I think we put badges on things to try and make them shiny and new...And sometimes by making it new, I think we complicate it and we then hinder people on the ground who are working with young people, we hinder them in their response because we wrap it in new language and it’s a new approach and we’re going to do things differently and we’ve got a new referral form to a new system and a new unit and we’re going to do new things with new pathways and it’s not new, we’ve just been doing it forever. And, these young people have been working their way through challenging situations for many, many years and so I feel, you can probably tell, I get frustrated” (P14)

This is a lasting tension for the VRU to consider. It needs to straddle the ‘crest-of-the-wave’ in terms of central funding and the raised profile of Violence reduction, nationally and indeed internationally, but the local impact of this cannot be lost and it is vital to capitalise and maintain best practice at this level.

A second feature of the articulation of the vision and purpose of the VRU concerned the general understanding of its aims and approach. There was evidence of broad support for the approach adopted by the VRU. The public health’ and ‘whole systems’ approaches were widely if not universally recognised as the core approaches adopted by the VRU and these were seen to be the most appropriate means through which to both understand and respond to violence. Violence was also recognised as being rooted in broad ranging social issues which necessitate involvement of agencies who lie outside of the traditional criminal justice sphere:

“violence tends to be a symptom of wider societal issues. And those issues are related to health, housing, education, and employment. And lots of other issues, none of which are necessarily the policing can help” (P1)

“it’s about the root causes, it’s understanding the causes of violence, it’s the causes of vulnerability, and understanding the trajectory that those conditions, socially and economically, create, and how they accelerate some of the positions that people find themselves in” (P4).

There was also a consistent understanding of the Public Health and Whole Systems approach, which the earlier phase of the evaluation flagged up as being a fundamental aspect of delivery

“I think the public health approach is very much around understanding those to prevent the perpetuation, moving forward, so it’s ... you tackle it before it happens, really... (P4)

The same participant goes onto note:

“the public health approach almost assumes that through early intervention, it’s better to intervene early and stop the problem from happening before it gets to a problem. So, they call it the “upstream approach” to preventing violence and ultimately I would say yeah, absolutely, when you look at the longer term perspective, of course prevention is better and the earlier you can intervene and the earlier you can prevent, there’ll be future generations of our citizens that hopefully will have the resilience and the ability to prevent this. (P4)

Although recognised as being central to the VRU strategy, the public health approach to violence which treats violence as a disease was not accepted uncritically. There was a sense that the approach was too far upstream to the potential detriment of the here and now. There were also concerns over the evidence-base for the approach in relation to specific areas such as domestic abuse and domestic violence:

If I look at the action plan for domestic abuse at the moment, under the VRU group, I can’t see anything there that’s directly got that public health label on it.... although nationally they’re saying domestic abuse needs a public health approach, nobody’s actually sat down and said what that would look like. What is a public health (approach)...? “Oh, you treat it before it happens, rather than the symptoms.” “Okay, and how do you do that for domestic abuse?” (P7)

Elsewhere concerns were registered around time-scales in the sense that a truly public health approach takes years to implement and evaluate which does not address many of the pressing needs of the region:

...and this is some of this frustration at the moment, to really do that effectively it takes time, and a significant amount of time, because eventually you want everything to almost sit in the prevent agenda rather than some of the more acute work, but of course to move us into that position we already have cohorts that are along that spectrum of activity and vulnerability, etc” (P4).

In many respects the issue here is one of short-term funding arrangements which has blighted earlier initiatives in this area. The VRU itself with its annual funding cycle is not immune to this as we shall see later. For now, other concerns with the public health approach stem from the fact that it is very long-term and consequently may not be appropriate for immediate issues and risks:

My only kind of I suppose gripe with the public health approach is it leaves little for the here and now. So, when you’re trying to – so they give the example of a river and they give the example of lots of people drowning. So, go to the source and try and fix that space before. But, my issue from a Community Safety Partnership is I still have to get the people out who are drowning at the other end. So, there’s an element of getting that balance absolutely right between the public health early intervention approach and the here and now which is,

“Look, there’s violence now, there are people struggling now”. I can’t afford to lose the generation that is impacted by it now. Yes, I want to build resilience for the generation in 10 years’ time and intervene across that but there still needs to be an element of the here and now. So, that’s my kind of understanding of both the public health approach and what it’s trying to achieve but potential operational limitations, if that makes sense”? (P6)

There was also some confusion – or at least uncertainty – over how the Public Health approach and the Whole Systems approach were compatible. For instance, one participant commented on how their service wanted to get upstream to ‘disband the antecedents to violence’ and in doing so to engage in meaningful prevention activity through early intervention, but what this meant for the whole system was unclear:

So in terms of whole systems approach, the first starting point, if you're taking a public health approach, is that one single agency does not have the answer and we need to engaged a whole range of partners to understand the epidemiology of violence, the drivers, protective factors, etc. But in terms of we want to implement evidence based responses, but in terms of our approach we need to change the way in which the whole system operates and works (P11)

A second area of difficulty with implementing a Whole Systems Approach is the age-old dilemma in intervention implementation of things working in one location not necessarily being easily transferred to another (Hudson, et al, 2019). Again there was a general feeling here that the VRU was helping to alleviate some of these issues, although it must also be stressed that this cannot be fully known at this stage:

I think the Violence Reduction Unit have really helped by sort of firstly just understanding the problem. Understanding what we mean when we talk about violence and when we talk about violence prevention....I think it’s about kind of understanding the risks and understanding what the causes of violence are. What makes people likely to be a victim or a perpetrator of violence or be kind of drawn into exploitation. And yeah, then sort of evaluating options really about how we do that. See if there’s an evidence base behind it. We’re definitely moving very quickly. Compared to when I first started, and again I think this has been a slight culture shift probably reflecting on the Violence Reduction Unit around using evidence bases, rather than a sort of gut instinct about what might work in a certain area, we can really look at similar areas for example across the region where they’ve had similar problems or a similar demographic where they’ve seen successes, how can we kind of replicate that in Wolverhampton?” (P13)

The challenges of implementing a whole systems, public health approach is a circular one for the VRU. There was a sense from our research that this was both a challenge and an opportunity and in many ways this brings us back to the issue discussed at the outset over the value-added of the VRU. In other words, the role/purpose of the VRU was recognised as being one of facilitation rather than doing. Stakeholder’s drew particular attention to opportunities that the VRU presented in terms of trailblazing and building on what had gone before, but do so in a way that offers space for innovation. Although the funding pattern of

the VRU has been seen to be problematic, for others this represented a key benefit and afforded the VRU the opportunity to act as an insightful, evidenced based commissioner:

“they should be slightly pioneering and innovative and brave of some of the things that they are almost trailblazing, you know, like a proof of concept-type, where they can bring some of the latest thinking to some of these interventions that are generally, you know, all the sort of...they could do quite a lot of sort of prototyping around some of these things before they come into the main sort of, I suppose, commission of the VRU sort of budget” (P3)

The value of the VRU adopting a ‘leadership’ role in communicating a strong message about violence reduction was also central here. It was suggested that the Unit could usefully be a source of challenge to partners, drawing upon the evidence base to highlight gaps in policy:

“And there’s also some real, you know, they should be challenging, with partners, around things like exclusion policies in schools, you know, why are we basically chucking kids out of school without a plan, because that...I’m sure there’s some stats on it, but if you’re excluding a young person, you know, they mistrust the system, and if they’re excluded and then not even looked at, then you’ve got some early challenges. And I think things like that, the VRU could be saying, “There’s a significant policy gap here, or a significant challenge that we’re creating ourselves, and the systems letting the young people down, that they’re then more likely to go into the criminal justice system later down the road” (P3).

However, it was also noted that the communication of such messages required careful navigation, given the political context in which the VRU operates.

“I think they could definitely have done more about communication, but again, sort of to have some empathy of their position, because you know, they could be putting themselves in a fairly sort of stormy political position if they were sort of too overt or too bold with some of their comms. So I think they’ve navigated it pretty well, but I think we want them to...just that bit of extra leadership and just have the confidence with their comms, which I think will come” (P3).

Other areas of promise related to the VRU as an organisation capable of establishing and facilitating local and regional networks by identifying stakeholders, bringing agencies together, developing and sharing knowledge and expertise, in order to build and share emerging/best practice. In addition, they were seen as having the potential to offer a panoramic view of violence in the region and thus intervening early, which is not always being achieved. One participant remarked how there was a need for some ‘hard-hitting’ early intervention, working with children and young people at a different level’ (P12). The sense here was the momentum could be provided by the VRU to move out of crisis management/crisis response mode to something much more preventative e.g. working with children before the Early Years Foundation Stage of formal schooling.

“So at the moment I think that we are still tackling violence too late. We need to be tackling it before children are born, but that is a very tough sell, particularly to the police, because you can’t measure what you prevent.... We are working with 2, 3 and 4 year olds on violence prevention. Obviously we don’t call it that, but that’s the level I think we need to be going in

at, but you need a much more holistic approach. So your inequalities agenda in a local authority must be aligned with your violence prevention agenda, otherwise it's not going to be successful over the longer term" (P3)

What came through clearly was that whilst there was evidence of a shared understanding of the VRU's role might be, the Unit was not yet fully positioned within this role for all stakeholders. For example, for some, the VRU had been very effective in bringing together key players to support joined up working and a shared approach, but for others this remained more of an aspiration and it wasn't clear that the VRU was positioned to fulfil this purpose.

"The Violence Reduction Unit have helped us kind of, I think we always set out this ambition but in terms of actually setting out a methodology around it, I think the Violence Reduction Unit have really helped by sort of firstly just understanding the problem. Understanding what we mean when we talk about violence and when we talk about violence prevention...I think it's just given us, as I said before, the evidence base to do it. Because, as much as we kind of set out that ambition, and we had some evidence behind it, I think the kind of evaluation data that's available from the Violence Reduction Unit has really helped us to promote that amongst partners as well" (P13).

Similarly the impact of the VRU as a coordinating authority can be seen in relation to specific areas of activity. Reflecting on changes in Community Safety Partnerships, one participant noted how the VRU have 'especially aided in bringing people together.' Prior to this, the sense was that much work was taking place in silos. The VRU managed to promote shared understandings, which is often a challenge in many of the sectors that fall under its remit as a consequence of competitive tendering of services. This function of the VRU is still in its infancy and other participants commented on how there still isn't a 'real cog that connects it all together' (P12) and that this is hindering a whole systems approach, in particular. The barriers here seem to stem not so much from governance structures, but more from how the vision is articulated. As one participant noted:

... it's about understanding each other's worlds...(the VRU) the people who have got these connections with everybody... (P12)

Overall, there is a sense from our participants that the VRU has provided a vision and infrastructure for continued participation and engagement on behalf of multiple agencies involved in the violence reduction agenda. However, there is a perception that clearer articulation of how the component parts of the VRU can work together to intervene and to make this joined up is still necessary. In some senses, then, the platform for a successful violence reduction agenda in the West Midlands is being developed, but what has yet to be fully established is the overarching purpose of what can be developed on the platform and *how* change may be realised in a sustainable way, much of which links to the relatively unknown aspects of the Theory of Change (see below)

Recommendation 6

Explore interventions that offer preventative education or services focused on the effects of violence during pregnancy and early in the life course, including encouraging educational establishments - at nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary levels - to implement a range of approaches to preventing youth violence before it begins.

2.3 Theme 3. Communication (And Commissioning)

In the previous discussion it was noted how there was a general perception that the VRU has produced a vision and has buttressed the infrastructure for tackling violence in the region. But it was also suggested that the theory of how violence reduction could occur was not fully articulated. So, the tools are in place, the grounds has been prepared, but the blueprint is still in draft form. In many respects, our participants felt this was an issue of communication and that whilst progress had been made, there was still work to do in terms of ensuring that the operational reality reflects the strategic vision. It was also acknowledged, however, that to even get to this stage had taken an enormous amount of perspiration, especially in bringing some of the key strategic players on board:

“I think from an operational perspective it’s still in the ‘end of forming, might be starting storming’ bit... and it’s been quite a bumpy journey, with all kind of true reflection, where there’s been lots of questions about the clarity of the direction of travel, the strategic priority setting, how the moving parts beneath those priorities are working, are feeding in, how we are sharing upwards, outwards, downwards and sideways, so there has been over the past 12 months lots of constructive challenge in how it operates as a body” (P4).

A consistent point of view expressed by our participants that there was still significant work to around the communication of the strategy, what we might term the *how* of violence reduction. This is an important point not just because articulating the vision justifies the activity that follows, but that it is vital for transparency in decision-making. In research terms, it is the equivalent of developing the research question, which provides the foundations for the successful completion of a research project (Blaikie, 2000). In terms of how this impacts on delivery and other areas of the VRU, the sense here was that the absence of an externally shared vision, had the potential to generate suspicion in terms of the activities that were being funded. In some ways, this issue is not separate from the sense that the VRU has evolved from previous initiatives and that the selection of the areas of intervention is a legacy of this. Either way, it does point to the need for clarity in the commissioning process:

“There seems to be such a wide range of commissioning going on across sort of West Midlands Police, the OPCC and the VRU, and I don’t quite know how they do it without avoiding duplication sometimes. So, I think there’s an opportunity to be much more streamlined in, you know, who’s commissioning and where they’re commissioning and how they’re commissioning” (P3).

I know they were on about setting up a commissioning group, and my view has always been, "Well surely you need to identify what your objectives are, and what your big concerns are, and then commission against them?" Because that's how you commission (P7).

"Yeah, it feels a bit, you know, it feels a bit of a scattergun sort of approach, you know, being very hyper-reactive, which I understand is the environment is adding to that. But I think for them to sort of, you know, develop their relationships, maintain to be seen as a really robust, considered commissioner, and really relying on evidence, it almost... They probably can't afford to be in that position next year where they are being reactive just because they've got a bit of money, they want to get out the door, or because Covid has delayed delivery. You know, I know some of it is external factors out of their control, but it's almost from the vision and the strategy, it needs to be sort of better connectivity between the strategy and what's being delivered, and just a bit more of a planned approach. (P3)

There was also a sense that this 'scattergun' approach was understandable and actually being driven by the current climate, but that it might be time limited and that stakeholders and perhaps, more importantly, their clients may not accept this as a long-term arrangement:

"What I do know is, certainly from a Birmingham perspective, we within the local authority... want to make sure that the activities in Birmingham, we have some input in. And, I know we haven't always had that which has led to us being quite critical sometimes of some of the activity... constructively, not, "Why have you done this?" but more about, "Are you talking to the right partners? Are you speaking to the right colleagues? Or are you parachuting people in?"... earlier on it felt like people were being parachuted in and the feedback we were getting from communities was you know we have no idea who these people are. They seem to be getting resource from the VRU but it has no impact on how – we don't see them, who are they? On other occasions, there are people that are local that have been commissioned from an activity perspective. That community can say, "Oh yes, we're well aware of them but we weren't necessarily certain that it's a VRU" (P6)

In response to a similar questioning on commissioning, the following participant also noted:

... it's hard to make those judgements based on last year, because hopefully we never have a year like that again, but that's my sort of criticism, in some ways, is that, you know, if it had been more planned right from the start so you knew, which I imagine they did, but they aligned all their resources against those thematic areas, you know, they should have been in a position six months in to know, you know, "Actually, this is the commissioned activity we want to run," rather than those decisions seem to be very late, with a very, you know, a four or five day window. And community organisations won't thank anyone for doing that, because, you know, they either can't respond, or they try and respond, and they respond and think they've done an okay job, submit it, and if they don't get the money, the VRU says,

“You haven’t been successful,” they go, “Well, that was because you did it on such a short turnaround,” and it probably just annoys them, to be honest” (P3).

A difficulty identified here is that because of the time-pressured nature of the delivery of services, there is a perception that it is now difficult to work out the value added of the VRU and this stems in part from the sense that the activity is not joined up and clearly aligned to a particular purpose:

the bit about not having time to develop exactly what we’re looking for, what we’ve had is a process that has got a lot of well-meaning projects together but not necessarily projects that are necessarily having the impact that we want them to have. So, I would say the community connectors for example that the VRU have currently got...are beginning to make similar impact to what you’d expect a project to make. Because some of that might just be galvanising resource that’s already out there. So, if you’re needing engagement activity, well you may be able to get that free if you’ve got a good enough relationship with the youth service. Why do you need to commission somebody else to come out and do that? Or, you know there’s activities that we’re already commissioning to kind of bring in to play. So, I think there’s an element of, with the commissioned activity, that it’s been more political about the need to show that something is being done and activities taking place. (P6).

The blueprint for violence reduction in the region is the Theory of Change. In the phase one evaluation it was noted in the report that ‘the work that the VRU was doing to develop a theory of change was acknowledged, and recognised as having the potential to provide far greater clarity about what it is trying to achieve, the connections between its anticipated inputs, activities and outcomes, and how progress against these might all be assessed. It was widely acknowledged that the outcomes the VRU is working towards are difficult to measure or assess, and that a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative methods will be needed to do so. It was suggested that personal stories of change should be seen as equally as valid as quantitative impact measures.’ Our findings reiterate these concerns. We note, however, that progress has been made in the development of a challenging theory, but we also note some concerns with the process here.

Along with realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), Theories of Change approaches start with a sense of disenchantment with methods-driven evaluation. The key to the Theory of Change is to outline a programme theory whereby all components combine to produce a desired outcome alongside a clear implementation plan. A Theories of Change Evaluation then starts to analyse the programme on these two fronts (Blamey and Mackenzie, 2007) often using implementation theory, which takes the form of a hypothesis that connects the activities of a programme or an intervention to its suggested outcomes. Drawing on the work of Connell, et al (1995) and Fullbright-Anderson et al. (1998), Blamey and Mackenzie (2007) outline the following stages in the development of a Theory of Change, it should be noted at this point, however, that these steps are often co-produced. That is, the evaluators work with the programme team to create a clear Theory of Change and to capture ‘expectations of change’. It should also be noted that this process was not explicitly

followed in the West Midlands VRU although the following steps are still useful in determining how a Theory of Change should work, at least in theory:

- Step 1: The focus here is on the long-term vision of an initiative and is likely to relate to a timescale that lies beyond the timeframe of the initiative. Its aim should be closely linked to the existence of a local or national problem.
- Step 2: Having agreed the ultimate aim of the programme, stakeholders are encouraged to consider the necessary outcomes that will be required by the end of the programme if such an aim is to be met in the longer term.
- Steps 3 and 4: Stakeholders are then asked to articulate the types of outputs and short-term outcomes that will help them to achieve the specified targets.
- Step 5: At this stage those involved with the programme consider the most appropriate activities or interventions required to bring about the required change.
- Step 6: Finally, stakeholders are required to consider the resources that can realistically be brought to bear on the planned interventions. These will include staff and organizational capacity, the existence of supportive networks and facilities as well as financial capability.

Following a collective and iterative process the resulting programme theory must fulfil a set of pre-specified criteria concerning plausibility, feasibility and measurability (Stame, 2004). The theory of change that is elicited should be interrogated to ensure that the underlying logic is one that is acceptable to stakeholders either because of its existing evidence base or because it seems likely to be true in a normative sense. Second, the implementation theory itself should be questioned to ensure that timescales, financial resources and capacities add up to the aspirations of the programme. Finally, the Theory of Change needs to be articulated in such a way that it can be open to evaluation; this is only possible where there is a high degree of specificity concerning the outcomes of the programme.

These recommended processes for articulating theories of change are concerned with the types of activities, timescales and anticipated outcomes or thresholds of change. The mapping of the nuts and bolts of the programme is essential. Connell and Kubisch (1998:19) note how in a Theory of Change Approach, stakeholders should agree that activities A1, A2, and A3, if properly implemented (and with the ongoing presence of contextual factors X1, X2 and X3) should lead to outcomes O1, O2 and O3; and if these activities, contextual supports, and outcomes all occur more or less as expected, the outcomes will be attributable to the interventions. (Connell and Kubisch, 1998: 19). The question then is to the extent that such pathways were followed by the West Midlands VRU. Here the picture is somewhat mixed.

A key point of contention in relation to the efficacy of the Theory of Change relates to the relationships between stakeholders and the complexity of the system. We explored this in more detail earlier in the report. Various participants remarked that the difficulty of the system and articulating the Theory of Change stems from the origins of the evolution of the VRU itself. As we have also noted, the potential of the VRU stems from its work in consolidating various projects and elements of violence reduction that were already in

motion in the region. As we note elsewhere, many of the place-based projects have their origins in the communities in which they are serving. The VRU by contrast and by its nature is top down:

“I think there’s a slightly disconnect in the sense that we don’t go out asking our partners – I would always say, if you want something that’s bottom-up, don’t be too prescriptive, you know? So, be prescriptive enough that enables somebody to understand the aim that you’re trying to achieve. Then, when you’re trying to meet that change, be as open as possible with those delivery mechanisms that need to do that. So, let them create you know how they contribute. ... So, for me, the theory of change I suppose for individual activities, needs to be linked in a way that it’s the same aim of reducing violence but you allow the people that you commission, because they have to, they have to evidence how they are contributing. So, it’s almost like the theory of change, that looks great and it’s flash and it’s got great colours and everything else, makes sense for somebody to then produce their own version to say, “This is how we fit in to the wider theory of change that the VRU is trying to make” (P6).

Ultimately there is a sense that the language of Theory of Change is not universally understood by, and adopted as, a methodology for shaping the approach to what the VRU does. There are still some benefits of having a fully articulated Theory of Change in that it helps establish the key influences on the violence reduction agenda. Reflecting on the issue, one participant commented how:

It speaks to me about some of the complexities of the mission, in the sense that it... will help me explain...why violence reduction isn’t just about locking up people who’ve committed violence, and that investing effort and being willing to talk publicly about early years parental support is as important as talking about the crisis response in the event of an incident, for example. So I would say yes, it helps us legitimise the approach... (P9)

Our findings here reveal that it is clear the Step 1 of the development of the Theory of Change has been established and that the current initiative is tied to a wider agenda. Step 2 has however proved to be more of a challenge in that there is some confusion amongst stakeholders of the outcomes. Much of the confusion here stems from the communication of the Theory of Change throughout the region, but that this was something that the VRU executive were aware of. That said, various participants reflected how the plans are clear in the minds of the VRU board, but now they need to be communicated externally:

I think that’s an area that they would probably identify themselves internally to strengthen, because I think, you know, it’s a fairly new...well, it is a very new entity, it’s coming into a fairly complex, maybe slightly crowded space with lots of statutory agents and others, so it’s almost...they need to really think about how they can communicate their added value. You know, they’re potentially specialists, aren’t they? And how they can then work from a more sort of public health/promotions approach and bringing some of those parties together. You know, it’s a challenge, but I think I see that as one of their big purposes of how they can streamline some of those things” (P3)

Although the communication of the Theory of Change was slow, there was also an acknowledgment that this activity was underway and that momentum in this space could be beneficial:

"I know we did have a couple of conversations (about the ToC), and I think there was something shared, but I haven't seen it really, that it's gone anywhere, if I'm honest. So, I'm not really sure, to be honest... And again, that needs some real careful thought, because you know, if they are...it comes back to them not trying to do too much, and I suppose using the theory of change to inform the strategy, but also to understand what are some of the stakeholders they need to engage with. So, I suppose it comes back again to that sort of clarity bit. And again, it's quite challenging, isn't it, because they probably, I imagine, without going back to it but they probably have a fairly broad theory of change. So, I think sometimes it's helpful to, whether that's within the interventions, refine those theory of change and then, have your organisational one and it fits through all the interventions" (P3)

The benefits of a clearly articulated Theory of Change are acknowledged as it being something that would help reduce the amount of violence across the region and that it from what our participants had seen it would help to develop a supportive safety net for the most vulnerable across the region. There was, however, concern over how this was represented literally and operationally. In essence, there was concern over its articulation and communication:

Typical theory of change, it almost moves across the page, and this one doesn't, so there was a little kick-back, but I think the position that the VRU were in was that that was the version that is going to be presented to the Home Office... because it was piece of work that needed to be done, but an opportunity then to unpick that into usable formats for all levels of the system (P4)

As Step 2 has faltered, this has had a knock on effect in the development of Steps 3 through 6. Some of these are manifest in the expressions of a lack of clarity over what it is trying to measure – steps 3 and 4 of the ideal type process:

"I guess one of the weaknesses of this theory of change is confusing outcomes and outputs, and not really...your outcomes are that you should be able to measure outcomes, and you should be able to have clear indications of what the outputs would be that drive those outcomes. But unfortunately, from my kind of understanding of the way I would develop outputs and outcomes, it doesn't quite really resonate; some of the outcomes are aspirations and not outcomes. A number of these outputs don't have defined ways of measuring them, and therefore they're confusing some of the method...the wording around this. So you know, pointing to, "Adopting across agencies or shared goals related to violence reduction"; that's an outcome, not an output. So, you know, you can measure that outcome by looking at all the agencies' goals and seeing if violence reduction forms part of that, so that would be an outcome. The output...there's another, the output would be a percentage, or a number of kind of way of developing. So I guess this is probably why some people don't really see that as resonating as much as it could. (The ToC) is a good start, but I think it probably needs a bit

more finessing to be able to really galvanise the rest of the agencies and partners to corral around it. So you do need some hard kind of outcomes, sorry, hard outputs and clear outcomes that are measurable, that you can hold people to account” (P10).

Similar to points we note elsewhere there were also concerns that the articulation of the Theory of Change was hamstrung by the complexities of the scale of the problem in the West Midlands which has a knock on effect of what the VRU are trying to do and how this is communicated and to what extent:

“I know it’s known amongst the Executive, I know it’s known amongst those that have been working on it... and I’m not sure how much of it has, you know from the operational limit gone across to [stakeholders]. So, I think it’s sitting there with the Exec and we’re looking at now how to get that widely out there because it’s only just been produced. If you were to ask me the question in three months’ time, I would probably be giving you a different response (P4)

The issue here is one of dissemination and communication and that the impact of this can cascade through and beyond the system. As regards the impact of delayed communication on the VRU system itself:

I don’t think one theory of change necessarily works for the VRU and we’ve got you know the usual outcome focus with the input and what we’re trying to achieve on a single page, so whether we have effective partnerships, whether there’s actions and risks to mitigate the issues, who’s contributing to that, what do the inputs look like, what do the outputs look like? But, I think my take – and I’ve mentioned this to the board is yes, there’s a need for a theory of change but at what level? (P6)

The issue within the system is not solely one of communication, but also whether the complexity of the system can be encapsulated in one theory:

And the thing about theory of change isn’t it, everybody wants to kind of make it simple and put it on a page but when you have something as complex as the VRU, the one page is relevant I think for the partners that sit around the VRU Exec Board, for them to kind of understand from a systems perspective and then I suppose there’s something underneath that that needs to link to that but is a lot simpler for organisations to kind of understand how they contribute to this and where they fit in and where they sit in the broader theory of change model”.... (P6)

This participant also commented on how the Theory of Change was more relevant for some partners than others, but importantly its impact beyond the system is likely to be hindered in that ‘it doesn’t speak to the public’.

There is probably still work to do for us to get down in to the detail of activities and what – how we speak of the public or the citizen that we’re trying to engage, how much of the academic nature of a theory of change will they understand that you expect the

professionals to be understanding and make sense of from a systems perspective but when it gets down to the delivery, how much of it is then relevant? (P6)

The issue of how well the Theory of Change could and would be understood externally was also picked up by another participant:

...all of this conversation we have talked heavily around organisations understanding what the VRU are trying to do, but do the public understand what the VRU are trying to do? And I mean that in its widest sense, of that whole prevent agenda right through to young people that are perhaps in intervention or on the periphery of intervention, their family, their support network, those people they're in contact with, education etc. and I couldn't really answer that one because I don't think I know whether the young people that we support - and we support a good couple of hundred young people throughout the year - I'm not sure whether they know, whether they need to know, but I guess, yeah, there's always a bit of how you would break that down to a beneficiary's theory of change model, and maybe that is a bit of consideration there" (p4)

Recommendation 7

To revisit outcomes/outputs within the Theory of Change to ensure that these are clear and measurable

Recommendation 8

Formulate a strategy for communicating the Theory of Change

3. Conclusion

The establishment of the Violence Reduction Unit in the West Midlands has coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. The scale of the challenge, which was significant in the first instance, has been magnified by the current context. Nonetheless, there was a sense from our research that significant strides have been made in coordinating a response to violence across the region. As we have seen, this is an achievement in itself bearing in mind the variations in the delivery landscape across the different Local Authority areas.

Although there is a clearer landscape, there is also an overarching sense that the terrain has yet to be fully mapped and that a lot of the blockages to action stem from the limitations in the VRU's communication with its key stakeholders. Although positive steps have been taken in the design, development and dissemination of the Theory of Change, as a prime example, there is work to be done around its communication and operationalisation. Frequently participants would comment that they lacked knowledge or understanding of how the VRU made decisions. It was evident that *trust* was fundamental here. Some participants clearly articulated their feelings that the appropriate systems were in place or relevant approaches to violence reduction had been adopted. Others, however, highlighted areas where being in receipt of more information would have been beneficial and that the

VRU could usefully improve its communications. This was particularly the case in the commissioning process.

There was a broadly held view that the VRU had provided solid leadership in enabling partners to navigate some of the challenges that they encountered around delivery of contracted services. They had done this in the context of the pandemic and taken the opportunity to engage with groups in different ways as a result. Although operationally momentum has been maintained, albeit in different ways, the communicating the vision has, however, been beset with difficulty. There is for example an issue of whether approaches should be top down or bottom up that has yet to be resolved.

Many of the communication issues, we contend, are due to the complexity of system, but also the absence of a concerted mapping exercise of its size and shape. This frequently resulted in uncertainty amongst the stakeholders as to whether the VRU have got the right people around the table. Those that are around the table are on balance appreciative of the support, but they are also aware that support is precarious as it relies on short-term funding arrangements.

This brings us to what is arguably the most significant tension. There is need to move away from short term funding, both of the VRU and the services they commission, ensure that there was adequate space to develop an evidence base and avoid a 'hit and miss' approach to commissioning. But the challenge is greater than this. Our participants often spoke of the need for a re-orienting or reframing of the way that violence is considered. There is a sense that violence reduction has been the preserve of the criminal justice agencies and the receipt of funding has been a product of a policy window opening, usually as a consequence of a high-profile incident or series of incidences. Instead, the challenge for the VRU is to recalibrate and to see violence and its reduction as a foundational or ontological issue. Violence is an enduring feature of society and so violence reduction should be an enduring function. The challenge is then not what can be done in the lifespan of the VRU, but how can change be embedded throughout the reason on a permanent basis. Strides have been taken in this monumental task, some have been wrong turns and some retracing steps, but gradually things are moving forward.

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