University of Brighton

Project Vigilant: Evaluation Report

Produced for Thames Valley Police

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Executive Summary

In September 2021, Thames Valley Police commissioned the University of Brighton to evaluate their Project Vigilant, a perpetrator-focused, proactive initiative to tackle sexual offending in the Night-Time Economy (NTE). This study forms the first independent, academic evaluation of the initiative. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess how effective Project Vigilant is in achieving its aim, that is, to prevent sexual offending in the NTE.

The evaluation adopted a realist evaluative approach (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) and used a multi methods design involving interviews and focus groups with officers; observational fieldwork with officers on Vigilant deployments; a public survey; and an analysis of recorded crime data corresponding to one Police Force Area (PFA) and information collected by Thames Valley Police on stops completed as part of Project Vigilant patrols.

Key findings

- This evaluation captures much evidence on the effectiveness of Project Vigilant from a qualitative perspective. For example, officer accounts and patrol observations illustrated a focus on perpetrators, a desire to avoid victim blaming, as well as positive interactions with the public.

- Some differences were observed in police recorded sexual offences in the night-time economy in 2021 (when Vigilant was operational) compared to earlier years (i.e., 2018, 2019). However, the numbers were too small to draw any firm conclusions. The reopening of the night-time economy further to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions in July 2021 is likely to have contributed to the differences.

- Thames Valley Police conducted 123 vigilant-related stops between 1 September 2021 and 31 March 2022 across the four PFAs where Vigilant was operational at the time of the evaluation.

- In total, 116 individuals were stopped (four individuals were stopped twice and another stopped four times) during this time across the four areas. Half (50; 51%) of the individuals stopped were men who were already known to Thames Valley Police. Seventeen showed up on Thames Valley Police records system as linked to a previous domestic abuse incident (or incidents) and/or sexual offences. Three more men were linked to a sexual offence as part of Project Vigilant (i.e., following a stop). One individual was a Registered Sex Offender.

- The findings from the survey on perceptions of safety and experiences of harassment support what has been already evidenced elsewhere (for example, Roberts et al, 2022; Office for National Statistics, 2021d). Younger women feel least safe in certain settings, such as walking alone after dark, and are more likely to have experienced harassment in public spaces.

- Public awareness was low with only 18% of respondents indicating that they heard about Project Vigilant before completing the survey. About one quarter of survey respondents were students, however, only one respondent indicated they had heard about Project Vigilant from their university.

Recommendations

- Police Force Area leads should consider ways to enhance partnership working with local agencies, such as Street Pastors, Security Staff, and Taxi Marshalls, as part of Project Vigilant deployments.

- Thames Valley Police should resource an analyst to support the development of a perpetrator-focused dataset to inform discussions on the development of indicators to measure effectiveness.

- Thames Valley Police should consider activities to further raise awareness about Project Vigilant amongst the public, including targeted promotional work with the two local universities.

- Further development work is recommended to better identify the Theory of Change informing Project Vigilant. This would involve mapping out the different activities identified as part of the initiative, how these lead to the desired goals, and the development of an Outcomes Framework.

- Thames Valley Police should consider further work to measure the effectiveness of the behavioural detection training completed by officers.

- Further research to capture views and experiences from the more marginalised members of the local community, especially those with intersecting identities, is recommended.

Introduction

In September 2021, Thames Valley Police commissioned the University of Brighton to evaluate their Project Vigilant, a perpetrator-focused, proactive initiative to tackle sexual offending in the Night-Time Economy (NTE). This study forms the first independent, academic evaluation of the initiative.

The purpose of the evaluation was to assess how effective Project Vigilant is in achieving its aim, that is, to prevent sexual offending in the NTE. Within this, Thames Valley Police requested the evaluation focus on three areas:

1. the use of uniformed officers and non-uninformed officers
2. the effectiveness of verbal engagement with potential perpetrators
3. impact of Project Vigilant on public perceptions and confidence in the police.

This report details the findings from the evaluation. It is divided into four main sections. The first section outlines the research design and methods. The second section presents an analysis of the policy landscape at a national level and a description of Project Vigilant. The third section turns to the research findings. These are reported under three sub-sections:

Part 1: Views from the Police
Part 2: Public Perceptions, Experiences, and Awareness
Part 3: Police Data

The fourth, and final, section presents a summary of the key findings and incorporates recommendations for consideration. The recommendations are informed by the evidence presented in this report and reflect discussions with Thames Valley Police in the drafting of the report.

Research Design and Methods

The evaluation adopted a realist evaluative approach (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This approach seeks to develop and test theories about the factors or processes that explain why an intervention has had a particular result (mechanism), and what effect the context of an intervention has had on these mechanisms. It means understanding 'what works, for

whom and in what circumstances.' A realist evaluation involves understanding the mechanism (why a particular intervention has had a particular result) and the effect of the context to explain the observed outcomes.

Analysing mechanism means looking at the Theory of Change behind an intervention or initiative, in this case, Project Vigilant. This analysis of context takes account of factors relating to the implementation of the project. Outcomes may include 'soft' measures based on perceptions (for example, officers' views on effectiveness) or 'hard' measures (for example, number of sexual assaults reported to the police in a specific area at a particular time).

Multi-methods involving qualitative and quantitative data collection were used in the evaluation. Such methodological triangulation facilitated the validation of data through cross verification and checks the consistency of findings. Data was collected from: officers using interviews and focus groups, observing police patrols and a survey of the public. Thames Valley Police also shared with the evaluation team selected offence level data and aggregated figures on number of stops and as well as some details on the individuals involved.

Interviews/focus groups with officers

Views from eleven police officers were captured either through semi-structured interviews (6) or a focus group discussion (5). Each of the four Local Police Areas (LPAs) where Project Vigilant was operating at the time of the evaluation were represented in this sample. The interviews included three senior officers from Thames Valley Police who led on Project Vigilant either at a strategic or operational level. This included the two senior officers with overall responsibility for the Project Vigilant. The sample also included officers who had participated in Project Vigilant deployments either in a uniformed and/or plain clothed capacity as well as officers with experience leading on deployments (e.g., Detective Sergeant). Different ranks and roles were represented, from Police Constables to Detective Chief Inspectors. All interviews and focus groups were convened on-line via Teams. Discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Observation

Six shifts where patrols were operating as part of Project Vigilant were observed across three (from the four) LPAs. As part of this fieldwork, data was captured on officers'

engagement with the public and potential perpetrators (for example, observations of what was seen or heard, description of the circumstances surrounding different interactions etc) as well as quantitative data (for example, how many interactions, individuals involved, location etc). The fieldwork was conducted between early December 2021 and end of January 2022 and all observed patrols fell on a Friday or a Saturday. Our field researcher conducted 42 hours of observation witnessing 88 interactions between officers and the public over this period. Four from the six patrols were on nights graded as 'red' (Thames Valley Police classified nights according to a 'traffic-light system', 'red' nights meant particular events were taking place and some disorder was anticipated) and therefore involved fully resourced deployments (i.e., involving uniformed and plain clothed officers). The remaining two observations fell on 'amber' nights meaning Project Vigilant deployments involving uniformed officers only.

Survey

The survey invited responses from the public along three themes: their perceptions of safety in different settings (e.g., walking on your own during the night), experiences of harassment in the previous 12 months, and their awareness and views on Project Vigilant. Closed questions using Likert scales comprised most of the survey questions. Out of the four LPAs where Project Vigilant was operating at the time of the evaluation, Oxford was where Project Vigilant was most well-established. For this reason, the survey focused on Oxford City residents. The survey was available to complete on-line. There was an incentive in the form of a £100 voucher to encourage responses (winner randomly selected).

The survey invited views from all members of the public in the target area, Oxford City Centre, aged 16 or over. However, in administering the survey we pursued a proactive strategy to attract responses from younger women. This strategy was reflected in the communications around promoting the survey, and in the participant information sheet included within the survey itself. Thames Valley Police promoted the survey using their official channels on social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter. They also shared the link to the survey with key partners, such as Oxfordshire Sexual Abuse and Rape Crisis Centre, and local Universities, who then publicised the survey on behalf of the police. The evaluation team asked known contacts in Oxford to share and complete the survey and circulated it across professional networks and on social media (especially Twitter). They also liaised with local education providers, such as sixth form schools/colleges, to market

the survey. This included distributing flyers with survey details (including a QR code) across eleven University of Oxford Colleges, three student-facing locations on Headington Campus at Oxford Brookes University, and three sixth form colleges in Oxford City Centre. Thames Valley Police also ran a 'week of action' to tackle VAWG in late March 2022. The survey was publicised further at this time. The survey went live on 20th December 2021 and closed on 31st March 2022.

Police Data

Accessing police data to inform the evaluation proved very challenging within the time and resource available to the evaluation team and Thames Valley Police. Two sets of data were provided to the evaluation team.

1. Police recorded (i.e., those not reclassified or 'no-crimed') sexual assaults or rape for four years (2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021) for one of the LPAs where Project Vigilant was operating. As Project Vigilant is concerned with sexual offending in the Night-Time Economy, the search was restricted to only those offences reported as occurring between 2000hrs and 0700hrs within a bar/club in the main areas or where it was clear that the victim was walking home or had just left a bar/club.

2. Selected information captured in the Debrief Forms officers were required to complete for every stop conducted as part of a Project Vigilant deployment. Debrief Forms record key information about the individual(s) stopped, the circumstances surrounding the stop, risk factors present, as well as a record of any accounts provided by the individuals concerned. Thames Valley Police shared aggregated data from forms completed for stops between 1 September 2021 to 31 March 2022 (7 months) for the four PFAs where Project Vigilant was operational at the time of the evaluation. Data included the number of stops; number of individuals identified; whether the individual were known to Thames Valley Police (in other words the individual had an existing entry on Thames Valley Police database) whether there was a history of domestic abuse or sexual offending in relation to the individuals concerned, and arrests.

The evaluation methodology was reviewed and granted ethical approval by the Cross-School Research Ethics Committee B at the University of Brighton.

Survey data was processed and analysed to produce key descriptive statistics. More advanced statistical analysis to establish correlations between variables was not possible

due to low numbers. This limitation applied to the survey data and the police data. The latter was analysed over time to identify trends and a comparison made between recorded offences pre- and post-Project Vigilant (albeit the data provided only covered a relatively limited period of Vigilant activity).

Qualitative data was analysed using the thematic approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) as the established process to analyse interview, focus group, and documentary data. After familiarization with the data, initial coding was applied across the data set, focusing on what interviewees explicitly said. Initial codes were then reviewed to identify latent themes, the underlying ideas, and assumptions that shape and inform the content of the data, and to explore the relationship between themes. Two members of the evaluation team reviewed these themes to ensure consistency within each theme and across the dataset.

There are a few limitations to bear in mind in considering the findings presented in this report. The evaluation was formally launched with an initialisation meeting between Thames Valley Police and the evaluation team towards the end of September 2021. Data collection commenced in December 2021, following ethical approval, and concluded on 31st March 2022 in line with evaluation timescales (the evaluation was scheduled to report at the end April 2022 although this was subsequently extended to the end of May 2022 due to issues in retrieving police data). These timescales proved challenging and were an integral part of the limitations associated with this evaluation. The online survey, for example, was available to the public for a relatively short amount of time (just over three months). This restricted opportunities to seek views from a larger, more representative sample.

The evaluation also corresponded with two significant events, the likes of which are unlikely to ever coincide again. First, Project Vigilant was introduced shortly after lockdown measures introduced in response to COVID-19 were being lifted across England, and the public were only just beginning to adjust to a life beyond the pandemic. This time will have brought its own anxieties around safety. In the same vein, the survey asked the public about their experiences of harassment in the previous 12 months, a period also coinciding with COVID-19. Whilst the timing will inevitably have influenced public experiences and perceptions, and therefore responses to the survey, it is impossible to establish in which way or to what extent.

The second concerns the negative, high profile media focus on police behaviour and attitudes in relation to violence against women. A detailed account of the incidents garnering such media focus are detailed in the next section. Suffice to say at this point that this focus will inevitably have been at the forefront of those who responded to the survey. Indeed, extracts from some of the survey respondents and comments from officers included in this report confirms this as the case.

Violence Against Women and Girls: Policy Context

National

Violence Against Women and Girls, or VAWG in its shortened form, is a significant international human rights and public health issue (World Health Organisation, 2021). VAWG refers to acts of violence or abuse that are known to disproportionately affect women and girls. Relevant crimes and behaviour include rape and other sexual offences, domestic abuse, stalking, 'honour-based abuse' (including female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and 'honour' killings), as well as many others, including offences committed online (Home Office, 2021).

Research has repeatedly pointed to the devastating impact these crimes have on victims and those around them (see, for example, Nevala, 2017, Office for National Statistics, 2021c). As for the criminal justice response, the statistics speak for themselves. An HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMICFRS) Thematic inspection report into 'into how effectively the police engage with women and girls' identified what it called 'an epidemic of offending against women and girls' (2021a, 1). In 12 months up to September 2020, English & Welsh police forces recorded 56,152 offences of rape and a further 96,984 other sexual offences. In 84% of these cases, the victim was female (Office for National Statistics, 2021a). The number of sexual offences recorded by the police has almost tripled in recent years, yet rape convictions have been dropping since 2017, falling to a record low last year; only 1.4 percent of rape cases reported to the police in 2019/20 resulted in a suspect being charged (HMICFRS, 2021b). More recently, drink and needle 'spiking' (the latter referring to incidents where someone is injected with a substance without their knowledge or consent, the former where alcohol or drugs are added to a drink) in nightclubs also raised concern (Weaver, 2022; McCann, 2022). This combined with complaints about stalking, harassment (experienced by two out of three women), exposure, voyeurism ('up

skirting'), abuse and unwanted touching have pointed to predatory male behaviour turning the night-time economy into a 'hostile environment' for many women (HMICFRS, 2021b; Office for National Statistics, 2021b).

Discussions on 'what works' in preventing and responding to VAWG are nothing new in academic circles, policy debates, and amongst professionals (see, for example, Fulu, at al, 2014 and Miller, 2020). However, it is only in the last decade or so have we seen improvements in the police response to such crimes (HMICFRS, 2021a; 2021b) with enhanced risk assessments, better identification of repeat victims and increased use of body-worn video to support evidence gathering (2021a, 2). However, such statements on progress sit uncomfortably with recent events. Sarah Everard was abducted, raped, and murdered by a serving Metropolitan Police Officer in March 2021. Then in September 2021, the murder of Sabina Nessa highlighted a lack of priority on behalf of the media, police, and legal system, that, it was argued, showed a level of disregard for Black and brown women (Mureithi, 2021). In December 2021, two police officers were handed prison sentences for misconduct in a public office because they took photos of two murdered sisters of colour, Biba Henry and Nicole Smallman, and shared the images on WhatsApp groups. In February 2022, the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) published recommendations designed to change policing practice after nine linked investigations evidenced bullying, discrimination, racism, and misogyny in the Metropolitan Police Service (IOPC, 2022). Public trust and confidence in the police and its response to violence against women has been damaged (End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2021).

Time will tell if Sarah Everard's murder really is a 'watershed moment for women's safety' (Davis, 2022). What is clear is her case, and the events leading up to her death, brought VAWG to the attention of the wider public and firmly located it on the political agenda. The Government responded with a new strategy for tackling VAWG (Home Office, 2021) and a 'statement of expectations' to guide the commissioning of services to support victims and survivors (Home Office, 2022). The new strategy states the intention to prioritise prevention, support victims, pursue perpetrators, and points to the need for a 'whole-of-Government and whole-of-society' approach (Home Office, 2021, 15-19). A new VAWG police framework launched in December 2021 required all forces were to complete action plans against the framework by March 2022 (National Police Chiefs Council/College of Policing, 2021). HMIFRCS inspections called for a fundamental, far-

reaching, system wide, approach to tackle VAWG the need to recognise that 'we can't just police our way out of violence against women and girls'. The National Police Lead for VAWG, Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blyth, voiced the same sentiment upon her appointment in September 2021.

Project Vigilant

Thames Valley Police introduced their Project Vigilant initially in Oxford in May 2019, in response to the suggestion that police should scale up their policing of the night-time entertainment economy (bars and clubs). Crime reports showed that more than half of all sexual offending occurred within the City Centre, which was also the most frequent location for rapes within the force area at the time (Thames Valley Police, Internal Report, 2019).

Initial results reported by Thames Valley Police indicated 'a 50% reduction in rape and a 30% reduction in sexual assaults in the Night-Time Economy in Oxford' (Thames Valley Police, Internal Report, 2019). In October 2020, Thames Valley Police received a crime prevention award from the International Association of Chiefs of Police for its work on Project Vigilant. In March 2021, the project was recognised by Government as good practice following the tragic death of Sarah Everard (Prime Minister's Office, 2021).

Thames Valley Police were awarded £90,000 from the Home Office in September 2021 to recruit a dedicated Sergeant to coordinate Project Vigilant across the force, initially three other LPAs (Windsor, Reading and Milton Keynes), in addition to Oxford. Funds from this award were also used to commission this evaluation. Additional funding (£297,000) from the Government's Safety of Women at Night (SWAN) was awarded in November 2021 to further develop the project. The funding including rolling out bespoke behavioural detection training for frontline officers to identify predatory behaviour. This three day nationally accredited training course, normally reserved for Counter Terrorism Policing, was adapted to encompass predatory behaviour in the Night-Time Economy. The training is designed to enhance the skills of officers to identify suspicious behaviour. The funding was also earmarked to develop a new support pathway in partnership with Circles South-East, a charity who work with convicted sex offenders, whereby individuals identified as displaying predatory behaviour are referred to a bespoke intervention programme to address their behaviour.

Project Vigilant aims to prevent sexual offences by perpetrators by proactively identifying predatory sexual behaviour and intervening to prevent this behaviour escalating to an

offence. Non-uniformed officers, specifically trained in behaviour observation skills, patrol designated areas, such as outside bars and clubs, between specific times on nights identified to be the highest risk (normally Friday and Saturday but sometimes including other nights). The officers identify both potentially vulnerable people and predatory behaviour. The latter may include individuals loitering, interfering with, leering at, or harassing others, or following lone intoxicated females. Once such apparently predatory behaviour has been identified, non-uniformed officers communicate with uniformed officers who then directly intervene, using body worn video to record their interventions. For every stop, officers are required to complete and submit a Debrief Form. This records key information about the individual, circumstances surrounding the stop and any accounts from individuals involved. There is also a process to manage those displaying predatory behaviour to reduce the risk they pose and to complete any necessary safeguarding post-deployment. This includes sharing the risk with other LPA's and forces and flagging higher risk subjects on Police National Computer.

Part 1: Views from the Police

In this section of the report, the findings from our focus groups and interviews designed to assess how police officers who completed Project Vigilant deployments viewed their roles are presented. Several important themes emerged from these discussions: how officers understood the new role they were undertaking, how well they felt prepared – or trained – for the Vigilant deployments, the extent to which Project Vigilant might be effecting a change in the way the NTE was policed and, in a wider sense, how the Vigilant approach might be impacting police culture and working practices as well. For the direct purposes of the evaluation, we were also very interested in the effectiveness of the Project Vigilant deployments, and the ways in which these was perceived by the officers involved, as well as how they perceived and operationalized the perpetrator focus entailed by the project. But first it seemed important to examine how policing priorities might have been changed or affected by the project.

Changing Police Priorities

A common denominator for many policing initiatives in recent years – from community policing, through problem-oriented policing and many strands of partnership and 'multi-agency' policing has been the attempt to change the way(s) in which policing is delivered and experienced in a range of settings and contexts. In this regard, although Project

Vigilant is a police-led initiative, its objectives are little different. Moreover, judged by the discussions and interview responses collated as part of this evaluation, the changes sought in Project Vigilant certainly resonated with a significant majority of the officers deployed within the project, even where it impacted upon traditional ways of working.

> … like I said, coming from a problem-solving background I'm a big fan of problem-solving work although lot of detectives are more minded to reactive policing because that's the nature of the job, but it is evolving. So, I've sort of found myself in this funny situation of wearing two hats at once really. [Det Sgt]

Other officers acknowledged a degree of tension in the policing role, not just from the perspective of officers' own experiences, but also politically, and in relation to the expectations placed on officers.

> Preventative work is something that I wish we did a little bit more in the police. We always struggle because people have different views of what the police are there to do. You've got very different views and a wide range of opinions … we quite often in the police feel we do a lot of social networking as well, such as picking up gaps for other agencies. So, the main benefit, if we're doing that preventative work obviously, we're saving not just time and money. That's my manager side of things speaking, but I do have to talk about resources. But obviously, you're preventing serious offences, the knock-on implications. We deal with a lot of rape victims who are struggling with trauma, the knock-on impacts, suicide attempts and self-harm, the whole lot. It can only be a good thing in that respect. [Det Insp]

Officers described the Vigilant deployments as different and additional to the more familiar NTE deployments involving different policing approaches.

> When we have a normal night-time economy, generally officers have to be reactive because that's what we have to - we have to react to what's going on, public order stuff. When there's Vigilant deployment, whether it's a full one or just a couple of officers, they get to be proactive. So, I think that's where the difference is. [DC]

And central to the Vigilant commitment is the understanding that officers deployed on Project Vigilant will not be abstracted from these roles in the event of significant public order incidents occurring. As one officer explained '… *we're completely separate from it. It's definitely benefited it more…you have the dedicated officers'* [DC]. Another officer acknowledged that, given the focus on addressing public order issues during NTE policing, other priorities could become overlooked.

> I definitely agree … a lot of the officers on a Friday or Saturday night are looking out for those public order situations and forget that part of that public order policing is that safeguarding and care of people when you're in uniform. And, actually…the

most appropriate person to look after a vulnerable female that's visibly drunk and in the street would be a uniformed officer so that it's immediately obvious to all members of the public they're there, and what's going on. [DC]

Officers who had experience of Vigilant deployments characterised them quite differently, more engaged with the night-time communities, more involved over longer periods, they argued that it was this that enhanced the impact of the project.

I think, for us, it's all about the engagement. Because, prior to this, we'd go out in a large group of officers generally. Perhaps pop out, do a 15-minute walk-around in one area, and then go on to the next. Whereas this, you know, it might take an hour, two hours at a time focusing on one area and being visible and speaking to people and having the time to do that and not having to deal with what else is going on. Because this is what you're zoning in on. So, I think, personally it does make a difference…Because you are engaging, talking to people. You're seeing why people are stood on their own. Perhaps they'll be moved along and then the next week they're not going to be there. So, a lot of the people we've seen like this, I've not seen again. [PC]

And yet situations arising could lead to issues and misunderstandings between different groups of officers involved in NTE policing.

We sometimes get that, the shift will call up and say, "Oh, there's a really drunk girl here. Can the Vigilant officers take over?" And it's like, well, no, that's not why we're here. Obviously, if we come across someone, we're going to safeguard them. But we're not here to babysit drunk people. So, I think, yes, that's it, that a lot of other officers just don't really know what we do and what we have to do and the fact that Vigilant is solely about settling and preventing sexual offences and violence in the night-time economy rather than just, well, helping drunk people get home. [DC]

Changing Police Attitudes

Perhaps inevitably, bringing changes to police practice is closely tied up with changing the role definitions, attitudes and expectations of the police officers themselves. We have already referred to evidence that many officers were positively embracing these new roles, even if this could involve certain disagreements and misunderstandings with colleagues and supervisors. As one officer remarked: *I don't think our sergeants necessarily know what our role is. They just know that we have to go off and do this thing*. [PC]

Overall, however, officers with experience of Vigilant deployments were almost entirely positive about the activities they were involved in and the contributions they made.

I just love being out and about and doing the operation… Because it is a different way of policing. It's not looking for arrests, looking for stop searches necessarily. It's doing the preventative stuff and the safeguarding, which is a bit of a different way of doing things. [DC]

A similar point was made by another officer:

> So, it's not just about criminalising people, it's also about identifying those who are maybe struggling and are on a bit of a downward spiral. Because life circumstances change and you know, we don't ever really know what drives people to do things. But we do know that there can be various trigger points. And yes, it's just about using that information to try and prevent things happening and to protect people. [DC]

When accounting for the effectiveness of the Project Vigilant deployments and the enthusiasm with which they have been taken up, it is especially important to understand this in relation to the initiative has been established, resourced and supported, the training that has gone into it, the operational briefings and the 'behind the scenes' infrastructure of information gathering, collating and recycling, and planning. A number of officers distinguished between earlier 'vigilant nights' and more recent deployments when the patrols had become more 'normalised' as part of the local night-time economy policing strategy.

> Yes, for the most part I think now that Vigilant is a lot more established it is, becoming a lot more standardised and it is a lot more embedded and it is a lot more 'business as usual' so that's certainly has improved for sure. An initial difficulty was just resourcing, getting the appropriate resources that we need and, I suppose, getting volunteers when it's rest day working and things like that have always been a little bit challenging. But not because people don't want to do it, I think it's just that there's always so much other stuff going on. [DS]

Furthermore,

> Project Vigilant has been embraced by both uniform officers and detectives… if I'm honest I was expecting more kind of push back from within my team particularly given our resourcing issues…but there is a big appetite to do it. And I think people see it as an interesting operation and something that has clear benefits and so, yes, I mean there's definitely people are keen to be involved. [Det Insp]

A first stage in the project planning involved forthcoming nights being classed as, green, amber or red, '*depending on what the perceived risk was or what events were going on*' [DC]. New Year's Eve and the run up the Xmas, Halloween and other high profile student nights, such as Fresher's week would be prioritised as higher risk and deployments planned and resourced accordingly. Some concerns were voiced about resourcing (taking officers from nightshifts) and while supervisors were pleased with the resources to run Vigilant deployments some officers raised resourcing and an over-reliance upon overtime working to support the project as an issue.

I've worked in lots of different areas in Thames Valley police and I do generally feel that police officers care about people's safety here. Like, taking an active role in doing that… talking to people. But I think the amount of time you have to do that is so slim when you don't have enough resources. [PC]

One concern is that people can be taking the overtime money at the risk of a lot of people burning out if they're working all of their rest days … that's my concern is if we're constantly funding this on overtime there's the potential is that the same people are going to take the money all the time and end up burning themselves out over it. So maybe we need to have some sort of quota of Vigilant deployments per year or per area or something like that. so that we're not … overusing people just because the money's there and the people are willing to work. [Det Insp]

And as one of the Detective Constable remarked, '*as with anything when you put out an option for rest day working, you're going to get some who do it because they're interested in the project and some who do it because they want the overtime. So, that always affects sort of how the deployments play out'*.

With the dates arranged and resources allocated, whether overtime or not, specialist training and pre-deployment briefings were particularly important in preparing officers for Vigilant deployments and shaping expectations about what the deployments entailed. A number of officer described their involvement in specialist behavioural detection training and sex offender training sessions.

I did some stalking and sexual offences training, and we had a briefing about it. So, I knew a bit about it ahead of time, … and then I got a duty change saying my duties had officially changed to do Op Vigilant, one of the night-time economy shifts we work. And from then I volunteered to do it other times. [DC]

Yet much as Project Vigilant involved specific training, briefing and tasking, some of our interviewees argued that the required skills we not so far from more conventional 'police intuition':

I mean, I have done the BDO training but a long time ago. But I think there's also something like a 'copper's nose' that certainly comes with this. And I know we mention that a lot in police, but you can't really put a price on it. It's that intuition and just basic understanding of who doesn't sit right in that particular area in that time frame. [PC]

One officer offered a ringing endorsement of the project and the contributions it could make to the safety of women and girls, her commitment appeared to stem directly from her training and subsequent briefing about the aims of the project.

…it's the second time I've done the sexual assault training, and then we had a whole hour input by the lead of the Op Vigilant project. And he talked about how it had been used, he talked about the behaviour. So, it was almost like a training session for

an hour on what the project was aimed to achieve. And I found that quite inspiring actually which is why I then put myself forward so many times to do it … I do see the benefit of it. I think that the more it continues and the more the public are aware that this is something that isn't going away. There's a lot of policing things that come and then they go. And I really hope that this sticks. Because I think the longer it's around, the more it will show results and actually in comparison to a lot of other projects we do, whilst you need the resources, in terms of the other things that are involved, it is minimal. It's what we've already got. It's the same people we've already got. It's just actively focusing it towards something else. And I think it will get better as time goes on, as people understand why we're doing it and see the benefits of it. And those individuals stop coming back around or they become really well known to us from that so we can prevent that. I think it will be really beneficial. [DC]

Not every officer seemed quite as committed, but this experienced Detective Constable clearly saw the constructive long-term benefits that the project offered. That said, many other officers commented positively upon the role of the pre-deployment briefings in setting the tone for the night ahead and for the alerts they provided regarding suspected persons, problematic behaviours, previously known locations for predatory behaviour and potential strategies for engaging with them. The briefings were especially commended by many of the officers who had undertaken the Vigilant deployments:

> Yes, so we have a briefing each time we do it which is normally sort of run by the same sergeant and the same detective that give the briefing each time. So, they'll provide us with any intelligence that's been gathered from previous Vigilants. And also, any intelligence that we've got from other sources and stuff like that… persons of note, persons to look out for, hot spot areas, things like that. And also, if any of the clubs are having special nights on like students' nights or RnB nights or special guests and stuff where we're likely to see big crowds… So, yes we do get sort of fully briefed and have a rough idea if there's anyone particular we're looking for. [DC]

An officer who had run a number of these pre-deployment briefings described their process and purposes in building a picture of potential sexual offenders in the area.

> So, we have the Vigilant briefing and then we also have a set of people to be aware of. So, I will generally hand those out and then give an overview of all those people. Because obviously, reading it day in, day out I've got a bit of an understanding as to each person, what we're looking for. Sometimes I'll sort of pick key ones, if there's been a bit of an intelligence gap or people think they might have seen them but weren't sure. So, I'm like, "Can we focus on them tonight, even if you see them and don't talk to them please just let me know." [DC]

Other officers confirmed that the briefings, especially the images of suspected individuals, were effective in focusing their patrol and observational activity: '*if you do come across those same individuals, it's almost like an alarm bell going off of like right, this individual has already been stopped and spoken to. So, they know why we're here'*. [PC]

Public Engagement and Effective Patrol Activity

We have already referred to the ways in which officers bought into the Vigilant patrol activities and especially valued the opportunities to engage more extensively with members of the public.

> When we're deployed in uniform, we very much encourage public interaction and telling them why we're there. You know, obviously on a night-time economy, police are floating around. But when there is a Vigilant deployment, we very much do encourage just telling people, you know, we're here for this reason. We're here to keep women safe. We're here to prevent sexual violence and stuff. And, yes, overwhelmingly, people will thank you for that. And actually, you know, if you stop somebody and you just have a chat with them, just checking if it's alright. [Sgt]

His colleague agreed, making clear the importance of communicating with members of the public, explaining the purpose of the Vigilant deployments, and disseminating a message about the safeguarding aspect of the patrols and their deterrent and preventive aspects.

> I think that's where the project's valuable, having potential victims made aware that we're there to do that job. I've walked around the town and people, they either talk to you or they don't. And the ones that talk to you are like, "Oh, what are you doing?" And you're saying, "Well, actually, I'm here specifically to make sure that vulnerable people are safe on this night out. But also, to stop those individuals that are trying to prey on those individuals." And the public's response openly to me is that it makes them feel safe us being there. But also, I think knowing that we are there for women and girls and that that's a priority. Because, you know, publicity and the news say all sorts of things. But actually, we're now having a conversation where you know that that's why I'm there. It's what I'm paid to do that night. I think people feel like they can then come over and speak to us. [PC]

One officer gave us a particular example of the intervention he'd made.

> Like the last time I was in Oxford, it was a uni night, and there were quite a few students who were there handcuffed, like cable-tied to each other on a pub crawl. But amongst the first ones that I saw, this poor girl looked like she was being dragged along. And I was just like, is everything okay here? But then everybody who you stop, when you explain and just say what you're doing and making sure it's safe, actually the attitude is, oh, thank you very much. People would then be like, "Oh, thank you so much!" Little cry while they hug you. "Oh, you're doing a great job." That kind of thing. And you're like, "Yeah, yeah, okay. Just keep yourself safe." But, yes, overwhelmingly, public opinion, when you tell them that's why you're there, it's very positive. [Sgt]

The cumulative effect of the Vigilant deployments, observations and tasking, and especially the way that police officers, the more experienced and familiar they become

with their roles, appears to embolden officers to be more outward looking and proactive. One of the Area Inspectors we interviewed addressed this point.

> Vigilant has given officers more confidence, I suppose, in challenging that sort of behaviour … And not just that, I think we've got a lot of new officers within the force and a lot of very young officers as well who may not be confident in sort of challenging people who may or may not be in a relationship and things like that. So, I think Vigilant gives them the confidence to actually ask questions about whether people are in a relationship or whether people actually want to be with the person they're with. [Det Insp]

Officers making these approaches spoke of the ways in which, because of the way the Vigilant patrols were set up, they felt more supported, and more confident about approaching individuals giving rise to concern:

> We had a dedicated channel on our radios to speak across in order to talk openly to one-another about individuals we were concerned about. And the [non-uniformed] officers would directly highlight individuals of interest with evidence as to what they'd done so that we could feel confident in approaching them, obtaining names and addresses, photographs of them, and either actually dispersing them or making them aware of their behaviour. [DS]

But more than just greater confidence in approaching people, other officers recognised that in conjunction with the training and the briefings, Vigilant deployments could be a useful education and up-skilling for officers alerting them to the vital signs of behavioural risks associated with NTE socialising and relationships.

> I think Vigilant is a really good education for officers as well. It's so easy to look for the obvious, the fights and things like that. But actually, some people who are being sort of, maybe, 'walked away' from friendship groups or otherwise targeted without them realising it. They're not going to be that loud, violent, out there, and actually, the ones we need to look for are those who are just quietly walking with somebody. Who actually, are maybe so out of it they don't have a clue where they are, or don't know what they're doing. And I think that the project highlights that and really makes it clear to people that this does happen, it's a real problem and it's come about from having the research and the statistics and the data to say there's a problem. [DC]

Another interviewee remarked,

> I think Vigilant is good for officer development, we currently have a very young and inexperienced workforce…there are now a lot of young in-service officers coming through. So, this is a good opportunity for them to practice and understand and develop their judgement which you would have got previously from more time on response. I haven't been in the police that long myself, I think nine years, but those first few years when you were on response you used to get a lot more time to develop your policing style and your judgement…deployments like Project Vigilant are only going to make better police officers and theoretically a safer community. [Sgt]

Later, another officer referred to the Vigilant deployments as involving a 'hybrid' form of policing, we regard this as a particularly interesting idea have already seen a number of intersecting dimensions of this (safeguarding/deterring; signs of vulnerability/predatory risks; proactivity/targeting; responsibilisation /deterrence, and so on). We will be returning to this tension by way of conclusion. First, however, we will review what police officers had to say about another familiar tension, between focussing on victims or perpetrators and then we will look at a number of significant incidents, before drawing this review of our qualitative evidence findings to a close.

'Big sister is how I see it': From Victim Blaming to a Perpetrator Focus

One of the key objectives of Project Vigilant involved the attempt to redirect the policing and criminal justice focus away from a perspective that entailed what is often referred to as 'victim blaming' and towards an approach that was more avowedly 'perpetrator focused' targeting sexual predators in the NTE (Rumney and McPhee, 2021). Central to Project Vigilant is the use of non-uniformed officers allied with symbolic presence (in the form of uniformed officers) and intervention. When we discussed the project with officers, however, a more complex picture emerged, weaving together notions of proactivity, prevention, safeguarding, and vulnerability suggesting a more informed and nuanced policing of the NTE rather than a sharp break with past practice. At the same time, a refinement of police-professional skills was entailed in terms of police officers interpreting what they were witnessing and making confident and appropriate judgements about interventions.

One of our first interviewees, a uniformed sergeant, explained the project objective in an apparently simple and straightforward fashion which, while it pointed to the essence of the project, did so in a way which implicated several other policing priorities.

> My understanding is that it is to reduce sexual offences within the night-time economy and to effectively make women and girls feel safer and have a more visible uniformed presence as well as having behaviours looked out for so that we're able to stop sexual offences before they happen. So, it's more of a proactive side than a reactive side. [Sgt]

This understanding captures many themes: a shift to proactivity, use of non-uniformed officers, symbolic uniformed presence, prevention, impacting perceptions of safety and, perhaps inevitably, police performance, reducing rates of sexual offending. Another

officer also referred to the proactive and preventive aspect of Vigilant *'....we're trying to move towards prevention. So, you're never going to stop [sexual offending] completely but if we can at least reduce the targeting. Make women feel safer going out again'*. [DC]

The perpetrator targeting aspect had been reiterated in Project Vigilant briefings, officers were reportedly very receptive to the messages being conveyed but, at the same time, as we shall see later, this was seldom divorced from parallel concerns about safeguarding and vulnerability.

> …yes, the focus is so clearly communicated to them that it's about perpetrators and these are the risk factors you're looking out for… and I think because it is something slightly different, out of the ordinary for officers that's what's perhaps been so appealing to them. There's been a lot of interest and motivation to take part. I've not had any difficulties I think getting that message across I would say. [Det Sgt]

There might seem something counter-intuitive in officers being reminded of the need to be 'offender focussed', for the cultivation of a suspicion (or 'profiling') regarding persons deemed 'out-of-place' or 'up to no good' has often been depicted as an essential aspect of police professional socialisation (Cray, 1972; Lee, 1981; Reiner, 1992). In this sense, the significance of implicitly re-tasking, even re-socialising, officers to be more critically attuned to problematic and outlying aspects of otherwise hetero-normative and predatory male perpetrator behaviour could be seen as starkly exposing one of policing's major institutional blind-spots, something frequently addressed in feminist critiques of policing (Gregory and Lees, 1999; Jordan, 2012). But having said this, our interviewees clearly accepted, endorsed and internalised the positive importance of the shifting enforcement focus. As one of the Sergeants remarked:

> To me the key message has always been that it is perpetrator focused. I think that's why it's probably resonated with people so much, the fact that we're taking the onus away from the victims or potential victims of crime, for the most part women. Instead, we're saying we need to look at addressing offending behaviour because it's not fair to say to women 'you need to change your behaviour' and 'you need to be on high alert all the time and you need to be mindful of the clothes you're wearing and the positions you're getting yourself in'. We are focusing on the people who are risk of perpetrating sexual violence, and that's always been the biggest sell for me absolutely. [Sgt]

It might be suggested, therefore, that Project Vigilant simply works to realign the policing of predatory sexual behaviour in the NTE with most conventional 'offender focused' police patrol activity and it is this (supported by training, briefings and dedicated deployments)

which has facilitated its positive acceptance amongst patrol officers. And yet, as many of the officers we spoke to emphasised, this did not imply that another important aspect of the police community patrol function was being overlooked.

> … invariably officers will come across, you know, vulnerable people who need support and assistance and we would be remiss to ignore them and we certainly take that seriously. There's always that caveat with our patrols, if you come across someone who needs assistance you will provide it to them. [DC]

So, a focus on safeguarding and vulnerability remains a feature of Project Vigilant policing but in a rebalanced and more strategic fashion, as one interviewee put it:

> I think just that, it's obviously about safeguarding vulnerable people, not just women but men as well, I mean we've got some of our offenders in town who do target young men. So, I think it's partly about moving away from that sort of … stereotype … that it's only females that are victims… In a wider sense, it's trying to change the perception of what vulnerability looks like [and so] it's also safeguarding, its disruption, trying to make the offenders aware that [name of area] is not a good place to go and do your offending. That, you know, we are also trying really hard to identify the areas as well that are sort of hot spots really, areas where people keep being targeted. [DC]

A similar, over-arching or strategic commitment to safety in the NTE came across in another officer's remark, also indicating a shift from the more familiar 'public order' focus of policing the NTE.

> I'd sort of say [Project Vigilant] almost adds an invisible firewall, a layer of protection when vulnerable people are on a night out, they might not necessarily know that we're there. But the fact that we are obviously observing and watching means there is that layer of protection. I'd say that that's what it adds. It's almost an invisible policing aspect. Yes, we add the uniform presence to it, but you've got a set of eyes and ears above and beyond whatever else is there. Because, generally, Friday night policing, historically, has been all about the public order aspect. And any crimes to do with sexual activity or anything like that has kind of - not exactly 'flown under the radar' because everyone is aware that it goes on in the areas - but you tend to have it reported post-incident rather than proactively. I think it's been quite hard to measure the success of Vigilant because it's, like I said, it's a proactive operation. [DC]

Other officers confirmed this double objective at the heart of Project Vigilant:

> So, yes, it's safeguarding vulnerable people but it's also raising awareness that this does happen. And rather than us getting the serious reports the following day and going, "Oh, what could we have done about that?" It's like saying, "Actually, we're proactively trying to stop it, we're preventing crime not just trying to investigate it afterwards." Because you know, we've got our SSA first responders so, they're officers who've had additional training in debriefing victims of sexual assault. [DC]

We will return to the issue of measuring the impact of preventive operations later, although other officers, pointing to the issue of impact measurement, drew attention to the effect that Vigilant deployments could have in certain settings,

> It's not necessarily down to a number of arrests or a number of charges and stuff like that. So, it's hard. We fill out forms for each person that we stop and it definitely makes a difference having uniformed colleagues who know about Vigilant and who are keen. Perhaps they'll have been on first responder training, so that they're trained to deal with sexual assaults (which I think that every officer should be doing) but I think due to funding…perhaps not. But it definitely makes a difference to have officers who are keen on Vigilant and know all about it. You see a massive difference on the ground. [Sgt]

Part of the management of the project involved officers keeping a precise record of the individuals they had identified as potentially suspicious or potentially vulnerable and accounting for the actions they had taken. In many respects this record-keeping also pointed towards a solution for the project effectiveness monitoring.

> Yes, so, it's mostly about being able to identify individuals early on in the evening, whether they're male or female, who may become vulnerable to the night-time economy through whatever means that might be. It might be that they've gone off on their own. It might be due to alcohol, drugs, all sorts of different things. But at the same time, being mindful and being able to seek out those individuals who are there to be predatory on those evenings. Identifying them through their behaviours and locations, and making the other police officers on that evening as well as the vigilant officers aware. So, it's a group effort really to be mindful of those individuals', approach them, make them account for their behaviour which hopefully, in turn, prevents them from actually acting on that later on in the evening. And to make them aware that actually it's a hostile environment for them in our areas. [PC]

We will discuss later how the connections between preventing risks to the vulnerable and proactively deterring potential, for the moment, however, one respondent captured something essential, and in a much more nuanced fashion, about the changing policing emphasis in Project Vigilant. Asked how she understood her role in Project Vigilant, one uniformed officer responded:

> I guess big sister is how I see it and what I say to people. Like I'm coming over and, you know, I say, 'I'm sorry I'm probably ruining your night, but I want to make sure you get home safe. And that you're not going to be in a situation you're not happy with or that tomorrow you wake up and you're uncomfortable with so, yes, that's how I look at it. [PC]

Another officer summed up the 'learning curve' that working on Vigilant deployments had involved:

> I think there's been quite a lot to learn. But as we've gone through the deployments, as we've done more and more, you take on bits that you think, oh, I'll use that next

time. And I think there's been a bit of a learning curve. It's not about victim blaming, but it is about victim education… there has to be an element of personal responsibility. Nobody deserves anything bad to happen to them. So, I'd never victim blame and I'd never say anybody deserves anything bad to happen to them, but I do think as part of Vigilant, it's brilliant that we can prevent predatory behaviour and it's brilliant that we can actually step in before bad stuff happens. But sometimes, as much as it is identifying the offenders, it's identifying people who have got themselves into a situation that they are now vulnerable. So, yes, I think much the same. The real challenge is actually getting people to take a bit of personal responsibility. [DC]

Intelligence Collation and Administrative Support

We have already discussed the ways in which training and especially the pre-deployment briefings were vital to the work of the Vigilant patrols. The experiences of one officer who had undertaken both uniform and non-unformed patrols, and who also supplied intelligence support to the project is instructive in showing how the project worked to enable patrol officers to make effective interventions. As the officer noted, there is far more going on than just that which happened at night-time, but as was also made clear, what happened at night, the contacts made, observations and interventions had to be effectively recorded and filed back so that intelligence officers could update the intelligence files that served as a basis for the briefings. Officers commented that in the early days of the project (or when officers were new to the role) getting the intelligence reports adequately completed and returned '*has been one of the difficulties [because] officers are so busy but, at the same time, we do need them to do certain tasks and there can be a little bit of repetition because we want them to complete the debrief form but then also submit it as an intelligence report, so that can be duplication for them. I understand it is frustrating but actually that's the only way we can have that information captured appropriately that will allow it to be shared*'. [Det. Sgt]

> I've done the intell. side of it, collating all the debrief forms, revaluating who our top three are, if they need to changed and sort of that side of it. But I didn't know how any of this translated to actually being on the ground and doing [Vigilant patrols] as a uniformed officer. So, I picked up a couple of shifts as a uniformed officer as well and put the uniform back on for the first time in a year or more… It's interesting to see it from both sides as then I can adjust the briefing guidance for the DCs. It all makes sense to us because we're in the office and we hear it all, we see it all. Without that [officers on patrol] are just going to be rocking up, talking to these people and hearing, "*Yes, they're absolutely fine, they're just out with some friends*." And it's like, "*Well, who are those friends, because they're actually one of our high risk sex offenders. So, who are they now associating with*?" So that's really good intell. for the public protection unit. You can see that maybe they've moved away from one friendship group to another, so why will they have done that? And then it forms the basis for their next visits. And then the sergeant contacts us to say, "*Oh, actually this*

person is not really a concern anymore. He's engaging in the therapy, he's got a really good support now so can we not keep disrupting him… he's got a really solid group of friends and us keeping on at him is going to push him away." Or it might be, "*No, he's just found another little group or Registered Sex Offender friends, can we disrupt them as much as possible*? In these cases, we want them to know that we know who they are and we want to disrupt them as much as we can. [DC]

Initially there were also issues about who would collate and analyse the intelligence forms, '*they did it totally different in each LPA (Local Policing Area)… and in one area, the debrief forms were being sent to our central Project Vigilant inbox and then that's where they would sit untouched… but over the last few months it's certainly gotten a lot better*'. [DS]

Organisational and Personal Challenges

If intelligence collation, monitoring and sharing were part of the challenges raised by Project Vigilant, a number of other organisational, personal and professional issues arose that were central to the effective operation of the project. Some of the issues were more in the nature of 'teething troubles' during the early days of the project, but others were more akin to enduring tensions and dilemmas of policing; questions of co-ordination, follow-up, organisational support and resources. One of the LPA project supervisors was originally concerned about how the intelligence follow-up to Vigilant deployments would be managed in relation to such issues as shift patterns and areas of formal responsibility. After all, Project Vigilant cut across both uniformed patrol and CID detective responsibilities:

> My initial worry was there wouldn't be any follow up, you know, come Monday, or Tuesday when those officers go onto their days off. Sometimes I've seen good follow up, but there's still a little bit of a grey area as to who owns that follow up. Because it's you know, if you go to a detective now and say, "*This is your job*," they'll say, "*No it's not, it's not a serious crime.*" If you go to a neighbourhood team they'll say, "*Well, hold on a detective sergeant was running it on the night*," you know there are all sorts of discussions there. But for me, to make it as effective as possible we need that strong follow up and yes, for me the jury is a little bit out as to whether that process is quite there yet. [Det Sgt]

Part of the concern being raised here relates to the place that Project Vigilant 'sits' within the police organisation. This, as one of the supervisory officers noted, arose as a consequence of how the project itself began, although it did give rise to a number of 'organisational tensions', tensions that also related to the ways in which different departments within Thames Valley Police were resourced, equipped and prepared to undertake different policing functions.

> Project Vigilant does sit in a slightly funny place within CID and I think that's mainly because that's where it first originated. But it's in a slightly funny place because it's

more of a preventative strand of activity rather than anything else. So it might sit more comfortably with a problem solving team or something like that, rather than a reactive investigative department. Even so, I think we are the ones who benefit from it because it is preventing a lot of the offenses that we would subsequently have to pick up. And if it is going to be a long-term operation, then we probably need a sergeant or DS for each county, or something like that, to oversee the risk assessments and on-going management of those identified from the night operations. Because it's a lot of work for me and my DS to be risk assessing and then managing all of the people that are identified from the night, on top of our normal CID work. So I think there needs to be a reassessment of where the operation actually sits, where it is resourced from and who subsequently is responsible for ownership of the risk assessments and interventions around the people that are identified. [Det Insp]

Another supervisor spoke of the challenges involved in ensuring that the deployed officers were up to speed and familiar with their roles:

Whenever I've been in charge of it [Vigilant], I feel like there's a lot of decision making to do. So therefore, it's physically demanding in terms of you've got to be switched on, and you've got to work a lot of cultural change with officers who aren't always so on board with the preventative work… but then you are back in the office, listening to the shift radio to see if they've identified anyone or have called anything up that might be of relevance. And likewise, on the flipside as well, if we've got the plain clothes officers seeing like fights in town, it's also letting shift officers know that what has happened… but then also, pulling everyone back on point when it is over. It's like we say to the uniformed officers, as much as they're there or Vigilant, you can't just walk past somebody getting attacked and just go, "*Oh, that's not my project for tonight, I'm doing something else*." So, it's also then making sure that they get pulled back to Vigilant because that's what they're there for. [Det Sgt]

Facing competing demands many respondents acknowledged that resources were 'always a problem', as one supervising officer noted:

The resourcing and priority difficulty is always there. I would like to run this every weekend in every night-time economy location. But if someone said to me, "*What are you going to stop doing to enable that to happen*," I'd struggle to find that answer. [Det Insp]

We have already referred to the question of demonstrating the effectiveness of Project Vigilant – the hard evidence, in other words – of how the initiative is working. For many years policing was very much caught up in a narrow performance management culture (Loveday, 2006; Golding and Savage, 2008; de Maillard and Savage, 2012), a culture in which policing to established performance indicators did not always most effectively enhance community safety outcomes. To some extent Project Vigilant itself faced similar problems as one officer remarked.

The other issue is we've had, is that, as an organisation we're very stats led so, it's how many arrests have you had, how many positive detections have you had? And

unfortunately, when we've managed to safeguard somebody by submitting some intel on somebody who could potentially be a sex offender, but this doesn't fit any of their performance statistics. So, then it's like well, no that's not been done because actually, as an organisation we're not putting that as a priority. Because you're only measuring activities on tangible outcomes. So yes, I think that is an issue, but it's one we're trying to overcome. We are getting there but it's always just the extra thing, so it's quite a challenge. [DC]

At the personal level, we have already noted how individual officers appeared often very committed to the Project Vigilant, the professional and organisational challenges they sometimes voiced, however, generally centred upon resourcing, although they did acknowledge a few more personal challenges.

I'd say I've not found it professionally challenging or that I've had any afterthoughts in a negative way. I've found it extremely positive and I've tried to encourage that in my own team. I think the only challenge would be that I do notice the difference when we don't have Vigilant on regularly. So, when my team cover the town, say, on a Friday or Saturday and we don't have the Op Vigilant running, it does highlight to me how much we may miss because of that. Because when you're sat in the big van you've got a limited view of what's going on and, ultimately, if a fight happens you tie up all those officers in that van with that fight. And it's like, '*what else is going on*?' So, that's the only challenge that I've found is just being sat in the van thinking '*hmm, what else is happening that we are not seeing*'. [PC]

By contrast some aspects of Project Vigilant did give rise to challenges of a more personal nature. Perhaps this is inevitable, after all, the issues involved: gender, vulnerability and predatory sexual violence are highly sensitive issues arousing powerful emotions. The raised tensions following the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard, in London, by a serving Metropolitan Police Officer, not to mention longer-standing concerns about patriarchal policing cultures and practices which have not always served women victims especially well are likely to raise a number of issues. Officers touched on these issues, although because of the range of issues we are covering here we will only be scratching the surface. We have grouped these themes together as 'the sexual politics of police contact'.

One of our focus groups, once prompted, engaged in a discussion of how male and female officers engaged with members of the public, whether persons considered potentially vulnerable or those presenting possible risks. A starting point was the comment that –

…especially when you're interacting with the potential perpetrators, having both a male and female response is valuable because that perpetrator might react very differently to a male or female officer. It is a difficult one. [PC]

Her colleague added: '*You do have different roles, but it can just depend on who you're talking to*'. [PC]

As the discussion developed, the officers considered a more nuanced and informed point about gender and interactions with the public.

> The only other thing I'd add is that having male officers doing the, "We're just keeping you safe," part is actually very good. It's very good. Because there is a lot of negative press, at the moment, particularly about the Met, male police officers doing all sorts of bad things. And I think, you know, when we've got officers there going actually, "*I am a male officer and I'm just trying to keep you safe*." It can help to build trust. But, as we've said, it depends entirely who you're dealing with, what the situation is, who they get on better with, who they want to talk to. You know, that's just how it is….. Sometimes actually, you know, you'll be a female officer talking to a male as part of a couple and actually the girl doesn't want you talking to her guy. So, she will make a point of stopping that. She'll stand in front of you so that you're talking to her. And, so, it's entirely dependent on the situation. I suppose the ideal is to be able to crew a male and a female so that you have the option of where you're going with it. I mean, it never is perfect. But if you have that, it's great because you can then play it around how you need to play it in the particular situation. [PC]

Another officer, interviewed separately, addressed a number of these issues but also drew upon her own experience:

> I don't know, I think it does depend on the situation. I think for *Op Vigilant* it probably does help that I'm a female officer and also, I'm quite small so, I'm quite unintimidating if that makes sense. So I think it's easier for me particularly where you have to potentially touch people. Sometimes these drunk people are quite scantily clad and you have to sometimes have physical contact with them to, you know, sort of put an arm out for them to lean on you because they're drunk. Or try and scoop them up and get them somewhere safe. So, I think that it just helps because it's more acceptable for me to be able to do that than for a male officer to do that. I think it just makes it a bit easier… But then I would say, on the flipside, dealing with men who are potentially the suspects in these matters, then me being female doesn't necessarily help. Because if they've already got a bad attitude towards women then they might have the same sort of feelings and thoughts towards me.
>
> We did have one instance where there was a male who we'd seen on several occasions sort of acting strangely towards women. He approached us about three times on different roads when we were dealing with very, very drunk young ladies. We eventually stopped him and he tried to touch both myself and my colleague on the arm and he was saying that he liked looking at the lady officers and stuff like that. So, it's not that I'm afraid to deal with somebody like that but I just think there's kind of a flipside. It makes it easier for me to deal with the victim but then suspect-wise you're dealing with someone that maybe doesn't have as much respect for women so, there are sort of balances to strike. [PC]

Another uniformed officer added:

> You have to be alert to how people are reacting to you, but I think it's one of those things really. I don't necessarily class myself, obviously I'm a female, but I wouldn't say I'm a female PC, I'm just a police officer. So, I'm more than capable of doing my job, as is a male officer more than capable of doing their job. I just think sometimes you know, it just comes across a little bit easier on a night safe duty when it's as a female dealing with a very drunk female but yes. [PC]

Illustrations and Particular Cases

In this final section, a few illustrations of incidents the officers described as having encountered and dealt with during their Vigilant deployments are detailed. Alongside the issues discussed earlier these incidents give more detail and a clearer sense of what the officers are encountering, the decisions and actions they are taking, and the realities of policing violence and vulnerability in the NTE. These cases are based on examples provided by officers who were interviewed or participated in focus group discussions. Some are also drawn from the 'ride-along' reports from our field researcher who accompanied officers on patrols as part of the evaluation.

The non-uniformed deployed officers began by describing the routines of 'spotting' individuals who might present a risk:

> Most of the time, you've got queues of people outside the pubs. And then you've got the 'loners'. So, they'll be on the corner or whatever. So, the people we've spotted in the past have generally just been sat on their own out of the way. So, in terms of spotting, that's actually quite easy for us, as opposed to a busy High Street where people wouldn't necessarily stand out. [PC]

Officers described the process after an individual's behaviour had prompted them to intervene:

> **Case Study 1**
>
> During an evening Vigilant patrol, police approached a man who, after checking his vehicle registration number, was identified as a 'priority individual'. Now when this man is seen he is stopped and asked to account for his behaviour. The police officer explained that '*just being there and interrupting someone is enough to actually prevent*

someone doing something because they're aware that we're aware of them'. The officer explained that sexual offences often revolve around control and that interrupting and disrupting this control can help prevent offending behaviour.

Observing people's behaviour, out at night and under the influence of a few drinks demands careful handling, confidence and experience, the ability to recognise when what might be considered normal behaviour can cross a line. Officers described having to make sensitive judgements, distinguishing between 'normal behaviour' ('*I really hesitate to use the word "normal behaviour", but people interacting on a night out could potentially fall under suspicion*'). But the non-uniformed officers are there to spot 'persistence', not so much isolated encounters, and that's what they are reacting to. At the lowest level of intervention, uniformed officers 'will go in for a chat' –

> …and sometimes that's enough. You know, it's having the conversation with the person that you think you're not happy with. It can soon put you at ease. You know, just be careful, buddy. When you have got a dedicated deployment, you have the officers available who can actually step in and go, "Can we just have a quick chat? Are you alright? What are you doing out tonight?" And you can do it in a way that is non-confrontational and non-accusatory. [DC]

Uniformed officers described an incident in Oxford where they had encountered two very drunk young women with two men.

Case Study 2

Whilst on a Vigilant patrol, uniformed officers observed two young men and two young women walking through Oxford town centre. Concerned at the behaviour of one of the men towards one of the women (he was described as 'grabbing at her') the police officers approached the group. The man who was 'quite drunk' and the young women observed as being very drunk. Despite initial reassurances from the women, the police questioned the men who admitted that they had come to Oxford to 'pull' and only just met the two young women. The police officer then explained that there was concern about the young women's safety and their ability to consent, the officer explained to them '*I think you're going to get yourself into a situation that you aren't going to be safe in*'. The young men insulted the police officers, but the

young women, realising what the police were explaining to them appreciated their intervention and recognised for themselves that they were in potentially dangerous situation.

Another officer described a similar incident, this time involving two men and a drunk woman.

Case Study 3

As part of a uniformed deployment, officers followed a route through local parks where it is known streetlighting is poor. There officers found a very drunk woman in the company of two men who were smoking cannabis. The officers intervened and conducted searches. The officer describes how she noticed the men were not drunk, whereas the women was 'highly intoxicated'. Removing the young woman from the environment and despite initial assertions that they were all friends, established that the young woman had met the two men that night. During the conversation, the officer describes how realisation 'seemed to dawn' on the woman about the potential danger she could be in. When asked directly the woman said she did not feel safe. The officer then explained that this understanding enabled her to intervene, and to make sure the woman 'got home on her own'.

A final example involved two uniformed officers on patrol who had noticed a man '*interacting fairly aggressively*' with a woman in the town centre. They followed him as he proceeded to take her down an alleyway, where they found him '*kissing her aggressively*'. The description below is based on an account provided by the officers' inspector:

Case Study 4

As soon as the police officers arrived the young woman was able to break free and run away. When questioned, the young woman explained that she had met the man earlier that evening and he had been insistent on returning to her address. On the way

there, despite her objections, he took her down an alleyway. Police enquiries revealed that the man had an outstanding domestic stalking offence for which he was subsequently arrested. Given the perpetrator's background, the officer who was interviewed was fairly confident that the intervention that evening had prevented a rape.

Part 2: Public Perceptions, Experiences, and Awareness

The findings from the survey are presented in this section. Perceptions of safety and experiences of harassment are explored before turning to the public's awareness and views on Project Vigilant. To begin, respondent characteristics are summarised.

Respondent Characteristics

In total, 158 members of the public aged 16 or over completed the survey. Most respondents lived in Oxford (71%, 112); Cherwell and West Oxfordshire (13%, 21) or South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse (11%, 17). The remaining respondents lived in West Berkshire, Milton Keynes, Wycombe, and Bracknell and Wokingham.

Of those who responded when asked about their **gender**, the majority (94%, 145) identified as female. Eight respondents were male, and one respondent identified as non-binary. The remaining four respondents either did not provide an answer when asked about their gender or indicated they preferred not to say. Of those respondents who stated their **age** (153), most (43%, 66) were aged 16 to 29 years old at the time of completing the survey. The next most common (19%, 29) age category 30 to 39. The youngest respondent was aged 16 or over aged 16 at the time of completing the survey and the oldest aged 84 years. The mean age of respondents was 38 years.

In terms of **ethnicity**, 93% (146) of the survey respondents identified as White. Of the remaining respondents, four identified as Mixed, three as Asian/Asian British; three as 'Other', and two as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British. Respondents were asked if they considered themselves to have a **disability or impairment (**as defined under the Equality Act 2010 where disability is a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and

'long term' negative effect on the ability to do normal daily activities). Most (81%, 128) respondents did not consider themselves to have a disability or impairment. Only 15% (23) respondents did have a disability or impairment. The remaining seven respondents preferred not to say or indicated 'Don't Know'. Just under one quarter (24%, 38) of respondents were **students** at the time of completing the survey.

Perceptions of Safety

The survey asked about **perceptions of safety in three different settings in** Oxford City Centre: walking on your own during the day, walking on your own after dark; and when on a night out. Respondents were invited to rate how safe they felt in each of these three settings using a Likert scale (i.e. 'very safe', 'fairly safe', 'safe', 'fairly unsafe', 'very unsafe'). Recognising that some respondents may not participate in one or more of these activities, an option to tick non-applicable was available.

Respondents felt *most* safe when walking on their own during the day in Oxford City Centre. Only 6% of respondents (158) indicated they felt Fairly Unsafe or Very Unsafe in this setting. Respondents reported feeling *least safe* walking on their own after dark in Oxford City Centre. Nearly 60% (89) of those who responded (152) felt Fairly Unsafe or Very Unsafe walking on their own after dark. When on a night out in Oxford, respondents felt slightly safer compared to walking on their own after dark. Fifty-three per cent (78) out of those who responded (146) indicated they felt Fairly Unsafe or Very Unsafe when on a night out in Oxford City Centre.

Female respondents reported feeling less safe in comparison to male respondents across all three settings. Seven per cent of female respondents felt either Fairly Unsafe or Very Unsafe on their own during the day in Oxford City Centre. None of the eight male respondents felt Fairly Unsafe or Very Unsafe walking in this setting. Just over 60% (62%, 85) of female respondents for whom information was available (139) felt Fairly Unsafe or Very Unsafe whilst walking on their own after dark. Only one of the male respondents who answered this question (8) felt either Fairly Unsafe or Very Unsafe. This respondent reported elsewhere in the survey that they had experienced harassment in the 12 months before completing the survey. Over half (55%, 74) of female respondents for whom

information was available (134) indicated they felt Fairly Unsafe or Very Unsafe whilst on a night out in Oxford City Centre. None of the male respondents indicated feeling Very Unsafe with 2 (out of 7) feeling Fairly Unsafe whilst on a night out in Oxford.

There were clear differences in perceptions of safety across age groups for female respondents, with younger women in particular feeling less safe. Three quarters (48 out of 63) of females aged 16 to 29 reported feeling either Fairly Unsafe or Very Unsafe when walking in Oxford City Centre on their own after dark. For all other age categories, the proportion who felt Fairly or Very Unsafe fell to between 40% to 52%. The differences in perceptions of safety across age categories for female respondents also applied to a night out in Oxford City Centre, however, these were much less stark. Of those for whom information was available (132), respondents aged 16 to 29 and 30 to 39 were almost equally likely to feel either Fairly Unsafe or Very Unsafe whilst on a night out (61%, 36 compared to 60%, 16). For all other age categories, the proportion who felt Fairly or Very Unsafe fell between 40% to 47%.

Experiences of harassment

Respondents were asked about their **experiences of four types of harassment** whilst in Oxford City Centre in the 12 months prior to completing the survey.

- Experienced catcalls, whistles, unwanted sexual comments, or jokes from a stranger or strangers in public
- Insulted or shouted at by someone in public
- Felt they were being followed
- Felt physically threatened by someone in a public space.

The most common form of harassment reported by respondents was catcalling, whistles, unwanted sexual comments, or jokes from a stranger or strangers in public. Just under half (46%) of respondents reported they had experienced this. Two fifths (41%) of respondents had been insulted or shouted at by someone in public; 18% stated that they felt that they had been followed (in all cases except one the respondent did not know the person) and 18% reported feeling physically threatened by someone.

Female respondents were more likely than male respondents to have experienced each of the four types of harassment in the last 12 months. There were also clear differences in experiences of the different types of harassment across age groups for female respondents. Younger women (aged 16 to 29) more likely to have experienced harassment than other age categories.

Respondents were asked if they had told anyone about their experiences. For each of the four types of harassment, there was a proportion of respondents who told no-one about

what had happened to them. Two fifths (41%; 12) of respondents did not tell anyone they had been physically threatened or followed, 29% (19) who had been insulted or shouted at by someone in public had told no-one and 37% (27) of respondents remained silent about their experiences of being catcalled, whistled at, or receiving unwanted sexual comments etc.

Of those respondents who indicated they had told someone about their experiences in Oxford City Centre, the most common response, regardless of the type of harassment, was to tell someone they knew, such as a friend or a family member. For each type of harassment experienced only one at most two respondents reported what had happened to the police.

Awareness of Project Vigilant

To assess the **impact of Project Vigilant on public perceptions and confidence in the police**, it is important to first establish if members of the public knew about Project Vigilant. Most respondents (80%, 127) had *not* heard about Project Vigilant at the time they completed the survey. Two respondents were 'Not Sure'. Respondents who indicated they had heard about Project Vigilant were equally likely to live in Oxford (or one of the other areas were Project Vigilant was operating) as they were to live outside Oxford in one of the other Local Policing Areas.

Those respondents who had heard about Project Vigilant (18%, 29) were invited to specify where they heard about it. Social media was most often identified as the source (22%, 11) with place of work being the second most often identified source (16%, 8). Family/friends, the news, and information from a police officer, closely followed with each attracting an equal number of responses (14%, 7). Only one respondent indicated they had heard

about Project Vigilant via their university. With about one quarter of respondents (24%, 38) indicating they were at the time of the survey students suggests a need for more promotional work with the two local universities.

Safety and Project Vigilant

Respondents were asked how they felt about having **uniformed police on patrol** in Oxford City Centre at night. Overall, respondents were more likely to indicate they would feel safer with uniformed police on patrol than less safe or that it would make no difference.

Most respondents indicated they would feel much safer (42%, 66) or a little bit safer (35%, 56). Fourteen per cent (22) felt it would not make any difference to them. Less than 10% (14) indicated they would feel less safe knowing that uniformed officers where on patrol.

Project Vigilant also involves the deployment of plain clothed police officers, so we also asked respondents how they felt about having **plain clothed police on patrol** in Oxford Centre City at night. Respondents were less confident in how much safer they would feel with plain clothed officers on patrol as compared with uniformed officers. Just under 30% (44 out of 158) indicated they would feel much safer (this compares to 42% for uniformed officers) and 31% (49 out of 158) said they would feel a little bit safer (compared to 35%, 56) with plain clothed officers on patrol. Twice as many respondents indicated they would feel less safe with plain clothed officers on patrol compared to uniformed officers (20%, 31 compared to 10%, 14).

Part 3: Police Data

In this last section on findings, we turn our attention to the data extracted from police systems on sexual offending in the NTE. Summary data shared with the evaluation team from Debrief Forms officers were required to complete for every stop conducted as part of a Project Vigilant deployment is also considered.

Thames Valley Police compiled a dataset on recorded (i.e., those not reclassified or 'no-crimed') sexual assaults or rape across four years (2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021) for one LPA. The search used to extract the data was restricted in such as way so to capture only those offences with which Project Vigilant was most concerned, i.e., reported as occurring between 2000hrs and 0700hrs, within a bar/club in the main areas within the LPA, or where it was clear that the victim was walking home or had just left a bar/club. Data corresponding to 2020 was excluded from the analysis. This was because this data would have been affected by 'lockdown' measures introduced in 2020 to stop the spread of COVID-19. Research has shown this has led to a significant decrease in reports of rape and serious sexual assault to the police (Spence et al, 2022).

The dataset returned no police recorded sexual offences in the first four months in 2021. Assuming the data is complete, COVID-19 likely explains this anomaly (although looking across at 2018 and 2019 suggests police tend to record relatively fewer such offences in January, February and March, so seasonable variations may also apply).

Figure 1. Total number of police recorded NTE sexual offences by month, LPA-level, 2018, 2019, 2021
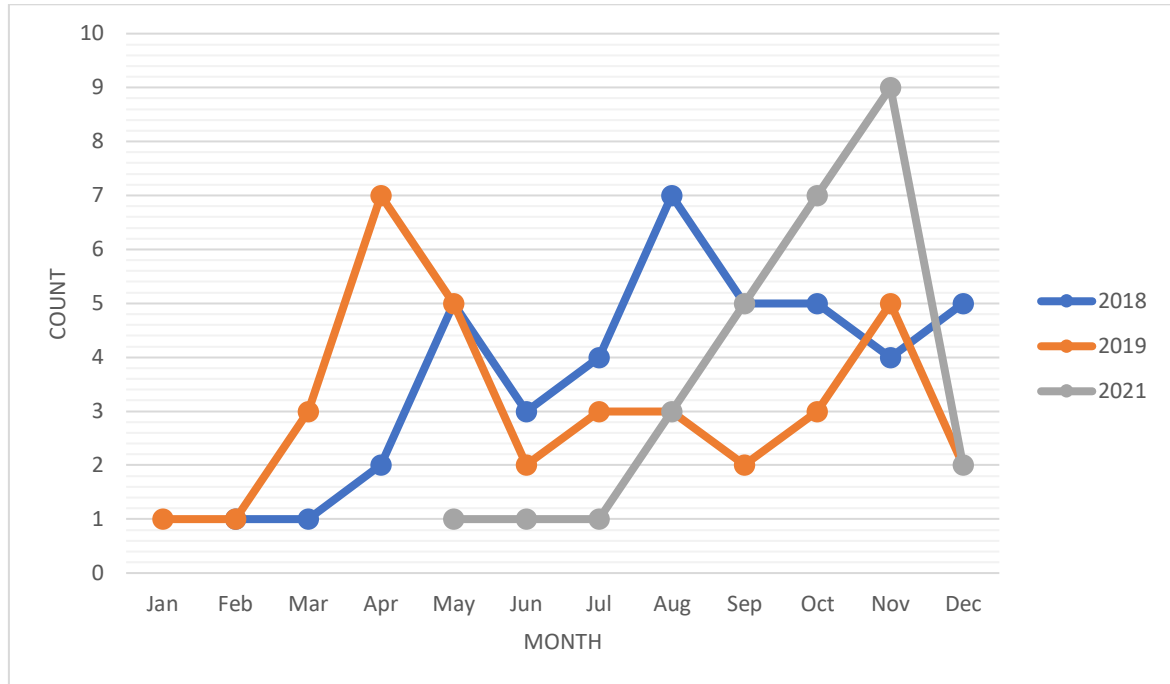
As shown in Figure 1, the Thames Valley Police dataset shows a sharp increase in recorded in sexual offences (includes rape and sexual assault) from July 2021 to November 2021, and then a steep decline into December 2021. Interviews with officers indicated that Project Vigilant deployments were operating in this LPA from July/August 2021 onwards. The timing corresponds with an increase in recorded sexual offences in the data. However, this time period also corresponds with the continued easing of restrictions introduced further to COVID-19 in England. Nightclubs, for example, re-opened in mid-July 2021 (Institute for Government, no date). One of the offences included in the dataset references

the suspect as a 'known Vigilant nominal'. The pattern observed in 2021 is not too dissimilar to the pattern for 2019 (albeit the increase for 2021 starts earlier in July and numbers are higher).

Table 1: Police recorded number of NTE sexual offence type and outcome, LPA-level, 2018, 2019, 2021

	2018	2019	2021	Grand Total
Administering a noxious substance with intent to injure or annoy	**1**	**0**	**0**	**1**
NFA	1	0	0	1
Attempt Sexual Assault	**1**	**0**	**0**	**1**
NFA	1	0	0	1

Attempted Rape	**1**	**1**	**1**	**3**
NFA	1	1	0	2
Ongoing	0	0	1	1
Rape	**14**	**11**	**0**	**25**
Charged	1	1	0	2
Currently under Investigation	1	0	0	1
NFA	11	10	0	21
Ongoing	1	0	0	1
Sexual assault	**11**	**10**	**4**	**25**
Charged	1	0	0	1
Currently under Investigation	3	0	0	3
NFA	7	10	3	20
Suspect abroad, shown as wanted on PNC	0	0	1	1
Sexual assault by penetration	**4**	**1**	**2**	**7**
NFA	3	1	2	6
Ongoing	1	0	0	1
Sexual assault by touching	**6**	**11**	**22**	**39**
Charged	0	2	2	4
NFA	6	9	20	35
Sexual assault over clothing	**4**	**2**	**0**	**6**
NFA	4	2	0	6
Grand Total	**42**	**37**	**29**	**108**

Table 1 shows overall there were less sexual offences in the NTE recorded in 2021 compared to 2019 and 2018. The dataset also suggests:

- no police recorded rapes in the NTE in the LPA in 2021 (compared to 14 recorded in 2018 and 11 in 2019);
- less sexual assaults in 2021 compared to 2019 and 2018; and
- a higher number of sexual assaults by touching in 2021 compared to 2019 and 2018.

COVID-19 will inevitably have contributed to some of the differences in the data for 2021. As assessment of the extent to which Project Vigilant contributed to the findings from this analysis needs further investigation. We return to some of the considerations on this front in the conclusion.

Information provided to the evaluation team from Debrief Forms indicated that Project Vigilant deployments led to 123 stops between 1 September 2021 and 31 March 2022 across the four PFAs where the Vigilant was operational at the time of the evaluation. In total, 116 individuals were stopped (four individuals were stopped twice and another stopped four times) during this time across the four areas. Half (50; 51%) of the individuals

stopped were men who were already known to Thames Valley Police. Three (2.6%) showed up on Thames Valley Police records as linked to a previous domestic abuse incident (or incidents). Fourteen (12%) were previously known to Thames Valley Police for sexual offences. Three more men were linked to a sexual offence as part of Project Vigilant (i.e., following a stop). One individual was a registered sex offender. Nine arrests (7% of stops) were made further to a stop, including one man who went on to be arrested on suspicion of rape at a later point.

Conclusion

This evaluation captures much evidence on the effectiveness of the Project Vigilant from a qualitative perspective. Officer accounts illustrated a focus on perpetrators, a desire to avoid victim blaming, as well as positive interactions with the public. It is also clear officers have taken on board the re-prioritisation of violence against women and are engaging in informed proactive interventions where they suspect opportunities for predatory sexual offending may be developing. When they do intervene, officers appear less concerned with arrest and criminalisation *per se*, rather their interventions allow time and space for women to reflect on their choices and opportunities and change their situations, thereby, interrupting a course of events which may turn later turn into a sexual assault. Bearing in the mind the need to recognise that 'we can't just *police* our way out of violence against women and girls', the findings from observational fieldwork, focus groups and interviews suggested there was scope for more partnership working at a local level. **Police Force Area leads should consider ways to enhance partnership working with local agencies, such as Street Pastors, Security Staff, and Taxi Marshalls, as part of Project Vigilant deployments.**

Data from Thames Valley Police showed some differences in police recorded sexual offences in the night-time economy in 2021 compared to data from earlier years (namely, 2018, 2019,). However, the numbers are too small to draw any firm conclusions. There was only one example in the dataset linking the offence to Project Vigilant. COVID-19 and the lifting of the 'lockdown' measures is likely to have contributed to some of the differences for 2021.

The information provided to the evaluation team from Debrief Forms provides a useful insight into the level of activity involved in Project Vigilant deployments. It also provides indication as to the effectiveness of deployments in identifying potential perpetrators and disrupting their activities. Such information is useful in baselining activities (e.g. number of

stops) and informing indicative measures to show effectiveness, for example, the extent to which Project Vigilant is interrupting individuals with a history of involvement with the police in relation to Violence Against Women and Girls. **Thames Valley Police should consider resourcing an analyst to support the development of a perpetrator-focused dataset. The dataset should be based on information captured in Project Vigilant Debrief Forms and used to inform discussions on the development of indicators to measure effectiveness.**

The findings from the survey on perceptions of safety and experiences of harassment support what has been already evidenced elsewhere (for example, Roberts et al, 2022; Office for National Statistics 2021d). Younger women feel least safe in certain settings, such as walking alone after dark, and are more likely to report having experienced harassment in public spaces. Respondents rarely reported these experiences to the police. Public awareness around Project Vigilant was low, with only 18% of respondents indicating that they heard about it before completing the survey. Only one respondent indicated they had heard about Project Vigilant from their university. With about one quarter of survey respondents indicating they were at the time of the survey students **suggests a need for more promotional work with the two local universities.** The presence of uniformed officers was linked to increased feelings of safety amongst the survey respondents. The association was not so strong when respondents were asked the same question in relation to plain clothed officers. These findings, especially those relating to plain clothed officers, should be viewed within the wider context detailed in the Policy Context section of this report, particularly Sarah Everard's abduction, rape, and murder by a serving Metropolitan Police Officer. Nationally, there is evidence to indicate the public's

trust in the police, especially on behalf of women, has declined following publication of this case (End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2021). The issue here is much broader than Project Vigilant and Thames Valley Police.

Limitations

Here we reflect on some of the limitations of the evaluation. These are in addition to those already discussed earlier under Research Design and Methods.

Assessing the effectiveness of Project Vigilant, like any crime reduction initiative, is not without its challenges. These challenges originate in the complexity flowing from the

different activities comprising the project; activities informed by different theories about 'what works' in tackling sexual offending in the NTE; theories which may be complementary, intersecting or at times in conflict with each other.

The focus on perpetrators should lead to a decrease in sexual offending in the NTE as potential perpetrators are deterred, or their behaviour is disrupted, controlled, or displaced, or they engage in intervention to support a change in their behaviour. Conversely, the focus on intelligence and the use of this intelligence to inform police activity may also lead to an increase in police recorded sexual offences. There is also the possibility that public knowledge and awareness generally around reporting such offences may have increased over this time, and the police data may well reflect this (albeit the dataset was based in recorded offences). Also, then again Project Vigilant itself may lead to an increase in reports from the public (e.g., positive interactions with public in NTE leads to more confidence to report). Ultimately, data from the police will only ever paint us a partial picture when it comes to impact. **Further development work is recommended to better identify the Theory of Change informing Project Vigilant. This would build on this evaluation and involve mapping out the different activities involved in the initiative, how these lead to the desired goals and the development of an Outcomes Framework.**

Further challenges revolve around the nature of the offences upon which the initiative focuses (despite improvements sexual offences are still under-reported to the police) and the difficulties harnessing 'hard' data to measure outcomes, and, in turn, impact. As one officer commented 'It's always the problem where preventative work is how do you measure it because if you prevent something then there's nothing measurable' (Detective Sergeant). COVID-19 restrictions also undermined the ability to make before and after comparisons based on offence-level data.

Project Vigilant itself was also evolving and expanding as the evaluation continued. As outlined in the introduction to this report, more funding was awarded early in the evaluation to support the training of more frontline officers in behavioural detection training to better equip them to identify predatory behaviour. An evaluation of the training lay outside the scope of this evaluation. **Thames Valley Police should consider work to measure the effectiveness of the behavioural detection training.**

The limited timescales that the survey was available to the public restricted the opportunities for data collection or to seek the views of the wider demographics. Whilst 158 responses were received these were largely from white (young) women living in

Oxford. For these reasons, the findings from the survey are not generalisable to a wider population. This is particularly true of residents from minority ethnic groups who contribute to 22% of the Oxford population (Office for National Statistics, 2012) but constituted only 7% of the survey sample. The same reservations apply to other genders as well as people with disabilities whose views were also under-represented in the survey. **Further research to capture views and experiences from the more marginalised members of the local community is recommended, especially those with intersecting identities.**

Final Thoughts

The fact that the first meeting between the evaluation team and Thames Valley Police fell on the exact day of sentencing in the case of Sarah Everard served as a poignant reminder to all involved as to the significance of this work. Although the survey showed only 18% of respondents were aware of Project Vigilant, there was a strong sense from responses to an open question in the survey that the public welcomed the initiative. Anecdotally, and in a similar vein, two members of the evaluation team who promoted the survey in Oxford were very much struck by the overwhelmingly positive response from members of the public they spoke to about Project Vigilant. The three sixth form colleges visited were especially keen to support the work. What came across clearly, based on our experience engaging with the colleges and students in Oxford, is that locally there is a strong sense amongst the local community that this is very important and worthy initiative. As the interviews and focus groups discussions showed it is rewarding for police officers too. As one officer commented '*It's good to be working on a project that the public care about as much as the police do*'.

Next Steps

Project Vigilant continues to expand and develop and Thames Valley Police as a force are keen to learn and improve and have already implemented a number of the recommendations contained in this report. Work continues with Project Vigilant one of the six pilots recently awarded £1.7 million from the Cabinet Office Evaluation Accelerator Fund to further evaluate interventions that tackle Violence Against Women and Girls.

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