research in practice

University of Bedfordshire

The Children's Society

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Driving systems change: Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland's Violence Reduction Network

Department for Education

Funded by the Department for Education

Introduction

The Violence Reduction Network (VRN) is 'a wide alliance of groups, communities and organisations' from across Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland that was established in 2019 by Leicestershire's Police and Crime Commissioner[1]. It is one of 18 Violence Reduction Units in England and Wales funded through Home Office Grants. The VRN 'seeks to collaborate with communities, organisations and existing partnerships to tackle the root causes of serious violence'[2], with a particular focus on preventing young people (under 25) from getting involved in violence and associated activities. A key focus for the TCE Programme is partnership working at the strategic level, and so it is keen to learn about the experience of the VRN in this area.

The Programme is also interested in whether the VRN understands there to be any links between serious violence and child exploitation and extra familial harm. We spoke with Grace Strong (Director of the VRN) and Dr Stevie-Jade Hardy (VRN Evidence and Evaluation Lead) to find out more.

1. **https://www.violencereductionnetwork.co.uk/**
2. Response Strategy: Preventing Serious Violence. Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland 2020-2023 (**Response Strategy - filesusr.com**).

1. The importance of language: youth violence or violence affecting young people?

Early in its journey, the VRN changed its use of language, moving away from the term 'youth violence', to 'violence affecting young people'[3]. The term youth violence and the narratives which often surround it can result in young people being viewed as the problem with an insufficient focus on either their vulnerability or the multiple individual, relational, community and societal causes of violence. Grace Strong refers to a tendency to separate children and young people into perpetrators or victims. In reality, this divide is often artificial and fails to recognise the vulnerability and victimisation that many experience before and after offending occurs.

Strong hopes that this small change in language will contribute to a shift in the wider narrative with an increased focus on the context and causes rather than just the 'end behaviour'. This fits with the wider ambition of the VRN which is that 'violence affecting young people' is no longer addressed solely through the lens of criminal justice, but instead through a more nuanced and contextual lens and generates solutions which match the complexity of the issue.

Strong and Hardy highlight how many partner organisations have adjusted language, with partnerships such as Youth Justice championing the 'child-first' principle locally. This is supporting changes in practice with more of a focus on understanding and addressing causes and an emphasis on relational approaches. However, Strong was keen not to downplay how challenging this can be when working across the system. Changing the narrative in the long term requires wider cultural change in relation to how children and young people involved in violence are perceived and treated.

3. Serious youth violence will be referred to as violence affecting youth throughout this resource.

2. Systems and silos: finding a space

When the VRN was being set up, Grace Strong and Dr Stevie-Jade Hardy noted that there was prolonged discussion on what the scope should be. The VRN carried out an initial strategic needs assessment and a key finding was that it is difficult and counter-productive to separate out different types of violence affecting young people. Young people do not experience or perceive their experiences as neat and distinct forms of violence. In particular, Grace Strong perceives child exploitation and violence affecting young people to be inextricably linked. A lot of the violence affecting young people happens as a result of child exploitation, and child exploitation is a form of violence in itself:

> 'Young people affected by different types of violence won't make this distinction themselves and the evidence-base suggests it's short-sighted to make an absolute distinction in policy and practice... we're really keen to keep joining the dots and make the point that it's all connected, especially the causes.' - Grace Strong, VRN Director

The VRN has fully embraced a **public health approach** when developing and adopting 'a framework for planning and implementing strategies aimed at reducing and preventing violence'[4]. This places a focus on prevention and early intervention. Grace Strong emphasises that, through this lens, it is even more important to understand the connections between different forms of harm that children experience and to tackle those harms in a co-ordinated, evidence-informed way. This is because, more often than not, many of the risk and protective factors that underpin violence affecting young people are the same as those that underpin child exploitation and other extra-familial harm. Grace Strong argues that what makes young people vulnerable to these 'different' forms of harm are closely interconnected. Consequently, the VRN broadened its initial scope and acknowledged that it was important to understand the links between different types of harm.

Dr Stevie-Jade Hardy referred to the work the VRN are doing in terms of analysing available data to demonstrate those links. Her team continues to carry out cohort analysis to explore associations between a) protective and risk factors and b) different forms of harm. The aim is that the findings from this type of analysis will support the VRN as it continues to advocate for a co-ordinated, preventative approach to multiple forms of harm that affect children and young people.

4. Response Strategy: Preventing Serious Violence. Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland 2020-2023 **(Response Strategy (filesusr.com)** p.7

'We need to spend more time identifying and tackling those shared risks and protective factors... we need to be more in this territory rather than focusing on single topic issues.' - Grace Strong, VRN Director

3. Partnership Working

Grace Strong and Dr Stevie-Jade Hardy reflected on how the VRN facilitates partnership working at the strategic level, and the key enablers and challenges in doing so:

Enablers for partnership working

a) Governance

A key enabler for effective partnership working was the use of an existing governance structure rather than adding an additional layer of governance. The VRN sits directly under the Strategic Partnership Board (SPB) for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. Chaired by the Police and Crime Commissioner, the SPB comprises Chief Officers from across the partnership and 'holds overall responsibility for tackling the harmful behaviours that threaten our communities'[5]. This means that the VRN is overseen and reports directly to a board that has responsibilities and direct links to all the relevant local authorities and agencies it needs to work with.

Under the SPB sit three sub-boards:

- The Offender Management Board.
- The Violence Reduction Board (the VRN's governing Board).
- The Vulnerability Executive (which focuses on child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, modern slavery and domestic abuse).

5. https://www.violencereductionnetwork.co.uk/leadership-and-governance

The Violence Reduction Board therefore works directly alongside two other partnership boards working on closely related issues, all within the same broader governance structure. Furthermore, several senior managers sit across all three boards. Grace Strong cites this governance structure as providing the VRN with a convenient way to influence priorities, initiate collaborative endeavours and escalate any issues or delegate tasks.

b) Common approaches

Another strong enabler for partnership working has been to focus on encouraging the take-up of unifying approaches and practices that are relevant to all of the VRN's partners. This includes approaches such as **trauma-informed practice** and contextual safeguarding. Similarly, these approaches are relevant when tackling various forms of harm that affect children and young people (whether child exploitation, domestic abuse or public place violence). Strong argues that by championing these unifying approaches, the VRN is able to start shifting mind-sets across the whole system to think differently about violence prevention.

Strong explains the importance of considering carefully how these unifying approaches are communicated to different audiences in order to secure buy-in. Some stakeholders want to see the data or broader evidence to support the adoption of a particular approach, whilst others want to understand how the approach works in practice and to hear real life case study examples. Strong recommends adapting the content of messaging in order to secure buy-in from all necessary partners, as well as helping partners to make the link between new and existing approaches.

c) Information sharing

Dr Stevie-Jade Hardy spoke about the power of data to enhance our collective understanding of the nature, extent and drivers of and connections between violence, child exploitation and other extra familial harm. Hardy suggests taking the time to develop strong relationships with stakeholders across key agencies and bringing them together in order to map relevant datasets. This involves identifying what data exists, what form it exists in, and how it is collected. This has enabled the VRN to advance understanding and awareness of the risk factors which are associated with different forms of harm, including exclusions and low attendance at school, child protection plans and looked-after children, and missing episodes.

Accessing this data, however, is no mean feat due to having to negotiate the tricky landscape of information governance and capacity levels within partner agencies. Hardy explained that the VRN's approach has been to focus on making progress with a small number of agencies and identifying priority datasets as outlined in the UK Government's Serious Violence Strategy. It is important to take partners 'on the journey' with you by highlighting the moral, business and legal case for sharing the data, i.e., by having this data we can target those children, young people and families who are most in need and ensure that interventions and services are as cost-efficient and effective as possible. Hardy suggests that regular updates on progress and on how the data has been used to inform strategic planning, operational practice and funding applications / commissioning can help to foster a positive and productive data sharing partnership.

'We need to facilitate and encourage organisations to share data amongst key partners and to use this data for action as there is so much potential. If we are to better understand and respond to the risk factors associated with violence, we must come together under the right governance, and be more willing to share and link data sets on at-risk and vulnerable young people to ensure that they're getting the support that they need.' - Stevie-Jade Hardy, VRN Evidence and Evaluation Lead

d) Identifying champions

Another enabler for the facilitation of partnership working has been identifying individuals within an organisation that are advocating for the same changes or outcomes as the VRN. Grace Strong notes that whilst achieving whole-system change can feel very challenging at times, the journey is more likely to be successful if you can identify and collaborate with other advocates and champions across the system. She strongly recommends finding and utilising these individuals when trying to influence change.

Challenges for partnership working

a) Different governance arrangements

Whilst working within the established governance structure of the SPB has been largely advantageous for the VRN, there were some early challenges. The VRN and the Violence Reduction (VR) Board works alongside two well established partnership sub-boards, each focusing on different types of harm but both needing to play an active role in the VRN's work. For example, the main focus of the VRN and VR Board is on public place serious violence affecting young people whereas child exploitation is the remit of the Vulnerability Executive. This required some early work on 'connecting the dots' and ensuring the priorities of each Board were complementary and involved collaborative solutions which sought to address multiple issues simultaneously.

b) Shifting mind-sets

As mentioned, a key objective for the VRN is to try to shift the focus from specific, individual types of harm to articulating their interconnected nature and the need to develop strategies which address common risk and protective factors. Through its focus on addressing the 'causes of the causes', the VRN has played an important role in highlighting the opportunities to have a wider impact by taking a more joined-up approach. An example of this is in relation to local work around child criminal exploitation (CCE) and an early decision to explore how the VRN's work was relevant to this and could be drawn upon to strengthen the work already underway. Although there continues to be a necessarily specific focus on CCE locally, there are now shared areas of work which are simultaneously addressing CCE and wider violence affecting young people, particularly in relation to local preventative and early intervention work.

c) Gaining commitment to unifying approaches

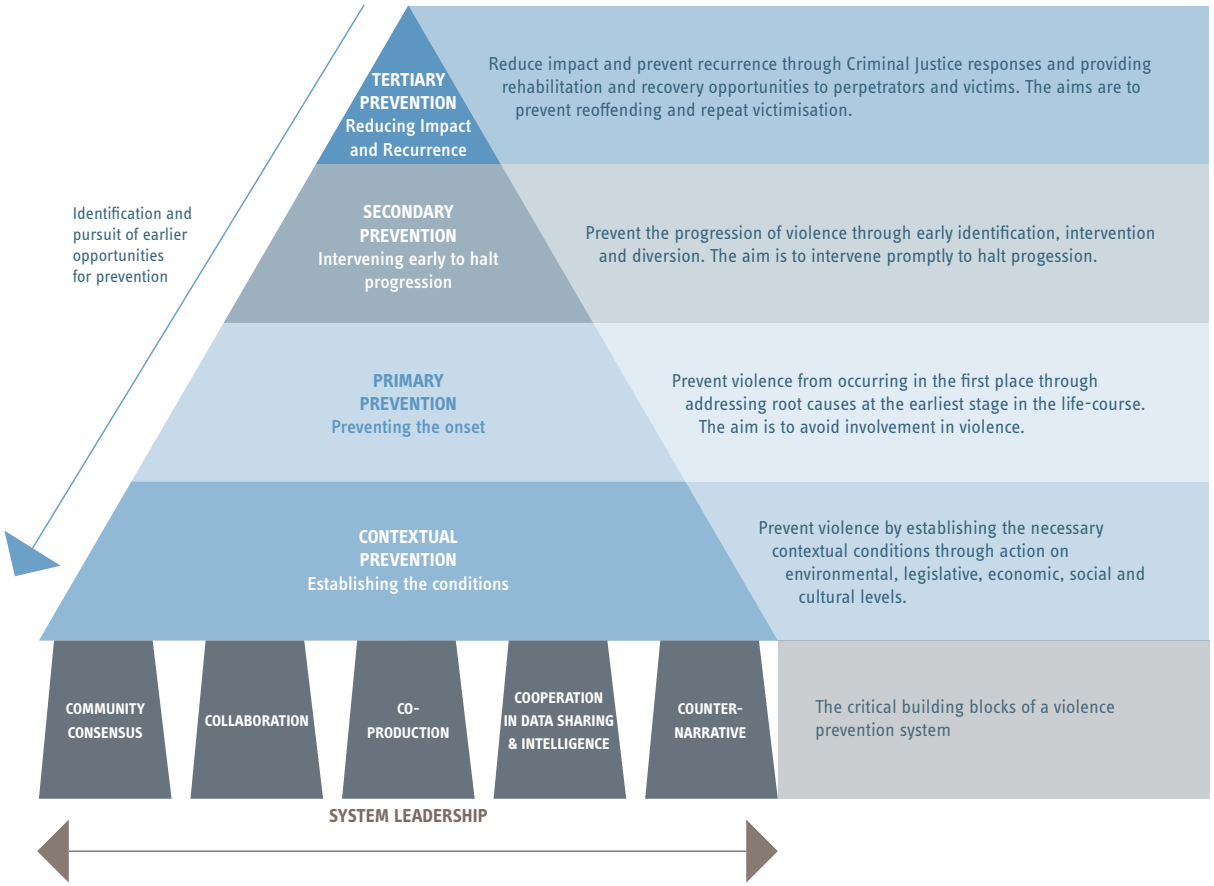
Whilst there was lots of evidence of good practice in relation to unifying approaches, (e.g. trauma- informed practice) these have often developed as isolated pockets rather than as part of a cohesive strategy. The resource afforded to the VRN has enabled the team to take on a leadership role, mapping strengths but also highlighting gaps and making the case for wider system-wide change so that the benefits of approaches can be fully realised. Some of the challenges within this have been to make sure the foundations are in place, which includes ensuring that there is a clear strategic intent, shared understanding and language, as well as commitment to a cross-sector plan rather than multiple individual agency-led approaches.

d) Mobilising all partners

Preventing and reducing violence affecting young people requires commitment from across a complex and diverse landscape, and needs to ensure all relevant communities are fully involved. Regional partners add to this complexity and issues such as capacity and infrastructure can affect how they respond to community and partnership needs at a local level. There can also be challenges in organisations that have not traditionally considered themselves to play a role in prevention and early intervention work (for example, some criminal justice partners). The VRN has worked hard to demonstrate that they also have a role to play within a whole-system, place-based preventative approach to reducing and preventing violence. Strong refers to **Public Health England's (PHE) guidance** and its **model for a whole-system multi-agency approach to serious violence prevention**.[6] The VRN has drawn on this to develop a local framework with different levels of prevention, i.e. contextual, primary, secondary and tertiary. If criminal justice agencies adopted whole-family and community approaches, the opportunities for earlier intervention, even at the tertiary level, have been made explicit in the framework. The framework has been adopted by the partnership and is routinely used in discussion and planning with partners to articulate and strengthen their response to violence affecting young people.

6. PHE (2019) A whole system multi-agency approach to serious violence (**https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/862794/multi-agency_approach_to_serious_violence_prevention.pdf**) cited in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland VRN (2021) Response Strategy: Preventing Serious Violence. Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland 2020-2023 (**Response Strategy - filesusr.com**) p.11).

A Place-based, Whole System Framework for Violence Prevention



Based on PHE (2019) "A whole system multi-agency approach to serious violence prevention"[7]

7. Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland VRN (2021) Response Strategy: Preventing Serious Violence. Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland 2020-2023 (**Response Strategy (filesusr.com)** p.11

e) Covid-19

The VRN was just over six months old when Covid-19 took hold in the UK. This presented it with challenges when delivering its core function, not least due to the unprecedented pressure that the pandemic placed on communities and partner organisations. Strong and Hardy reflected that one of the most significant challenges was the temporary withdrawal of the VRN interventions from face-to-face contact with young people and the initial obstacles this caused to sustaining positive and trusting relationships. Community groups and organisations demonstrated creativity and tenacity during the lockdown and quickly compensated for this.

4. Lessons learnt and recommendations for working with particular partners

Grace Strong and Dr Stevie-Jade Hardy share some of the VRN's learning around partnership working with certain statutory agencies and groups:

a) Working with young people

- When developing strategies or interventions for young people, both Hardy and Strong highlight it will not be as effective as it needs to be unless it is co-produced. For example, Strong refers to a recent campaign they developed that aims to reduce public place violence. Young people were involved in the design as the team wanted to ensure that the narrative and content reflected their reality. Unlike previous campaigns, it doesn't focus on knives or the stark consequences of violence but rather it encourages the development of positive social norms and uses active bystander methodology to empower young people to be good friends and look out for one another. The language and the content were designed by young people themselves which is different to prior, adult-designed campaigns. Strong believes that by enabling young people to take the lead, a more effective and targeted strategy to address violence is more likely.
- Furthermore, the VRN has also been able to secure commitment from partners not to put their logos on campaign content. If a campaign is designed by young people for young people then Strong asserts there is no need for partners to 'own' it. She recounted that young people told the VRN that, in most circumstances, campaigns which seem to come from official organisations are often not trusted or seen as credible by young people.

b) Working with communities

- Strong and Hardy both emphasised the importance of co-producing with communities. To do so meaningfully, Strong asserts that agencies and organisations need to regard community stakeholders as equal partners. A strengths-based approach should be taken, with partnerships recognising the indispensable knowledge, expertise and relationships that communities hold.
- To reflect this sentiment with concrete action, and in order to enable the genuine involvement of communities in strategy development, one action that the VRN has taken is to invite community members to join the VR Board. This will be a first across the whole SPB governance structure, and Strong hopes it will be an opportunity to influence other boards to do the same.
- Hardy and Strong advocate involving members of the community to help reach young people that statutory services are struggling to reach. This year the VRN are commissioning a community mentoring programme to offer credible role models and support to young people whereby different community stakeholders take on a mentoring role and offer support and guidance to young people within their communities. The programme will provide 'credible role models who will support young people and ensure that they are connected to the services that they need'. This approach is based on the principle that community members are best placed to develop trusted relationships with young people over a longer period of time. They can also provide young people with a consistent point of contact and support them with their interactions with a range of different services and professionals. The intervention, which has been co-designed with members of the community, will be subject to evaluation on an ongoing basis to assess effectiveness.

c) Working with the police

The VRN has developed a successful working relationship with the police in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. Grace Strong notes that the police have been incredibly receptive to the purpose and ambitions of the VRN. They have reconfigured key areas of work based on the learning that the VRN has generated. For example, they have established a Violence and Complex Crime unit which draws on a public health approach in both design and delivery. Grace Strong and Dr Stevie-Jade Hardy reflect on the key enablers for this close working relationship:

- At an early stage the police seconded a Detective Inspector into the VRN team. This senior leader has gone on to become one of the VRN's strongest advocates, championing their work to the whole organisation. This has helped to create a strong and productive relationship between the police and the VRN.
- The VRN team has worked hard to establish individual relationships with key stakeholders across all departments within the police. Rather than rely solely on senior leaders to influence change, they have formed direct links with leaders at different levels in order to also have influence at the operational level.
- The VRN acknowledges that it has the resources and the time to analyse data and develop strategies, which other agencies have not had the resources to do. The VRN has collected and analysed relevant data and then developed and shared targeted learning with the Police. This has further strengthened its working relationship with data now being a shared priority of work with a shared resource allocated to it.

d) Working with schools

- The VRN's work with schools is an example of how its leadership and additional resources support the strengthening of violence prevention in a particular sector. Grace Strong suggested that alongside working with local authorities, it has been important to develop direct relationships with schools. Whilst this means having to maintain relationships with a significant number of stakeholders, the VRN found it helped in terms of securing buy-in and accessing the right expertise when trying to develop strategies or resources. Importantly, this is at all levels of the VRN's work. For example, the VR Board has representation from both City and County schools, as does the more operational Serious Violence Delivery Group. There is also now a VRN Schools Network which provides a more efficient way of ensuring schools are involved in the VRN's work.
- As a result of the above, the work the VRN is undertaking in this arena is now driven by the needs of schools. Capacity can be a challenge so, through also securing the secondment of a secondary school teacher, the VRN has been able to take on the work of developing a Schools Toolkit for Violence Prevention. This brings together the research and effective strategies in one place, making it easier for school leaders and staff to access and implement it.

We want to hear more about your experiences of using TCE resources and tools.

Connect via Twitter using #TCEProgramme to share your ideas.

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692
email ask@researchinpractice.org.uk
@researchIP #TCEProgramme

www.tce.researchinpractice.org.uk

Author:
Ellie Mendez-Sayer

Research in Practice is a programme of
The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company
limited by guarantee and a registered charity.
Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756
VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall,
Totnes TQ9 6EL