

Violence against Women and Girls Task and Finish Group

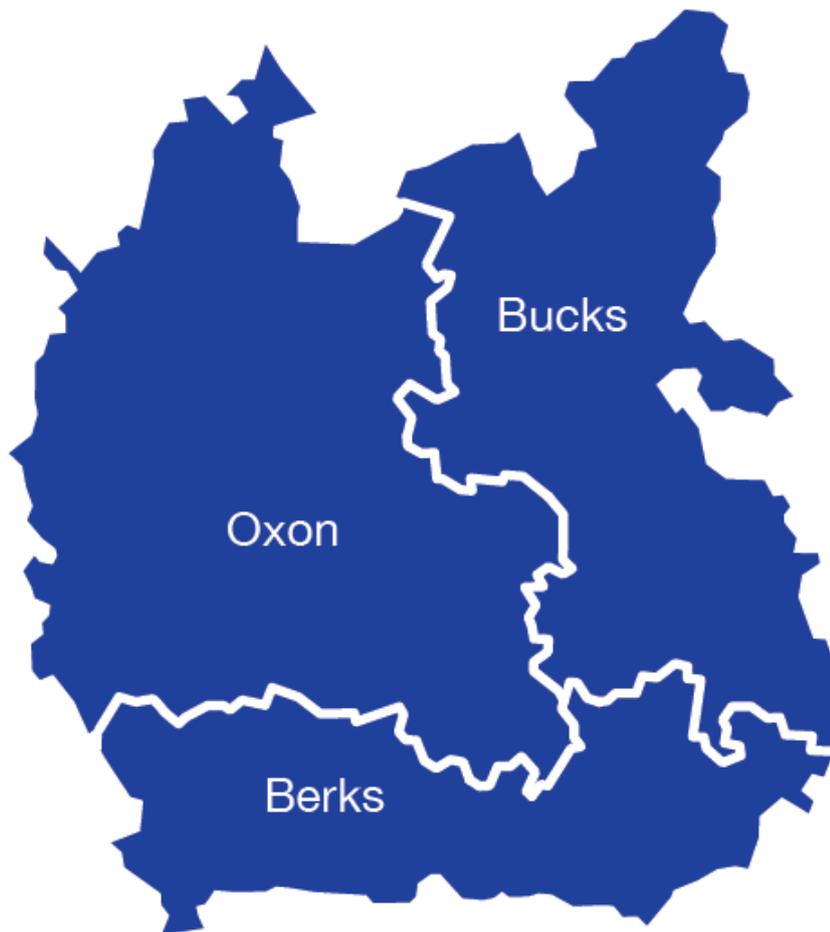


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Chair's Foreword



Over the past three months the Violence Against Women (VAWG) and Girls Task and Finish Group has held four witness sessions and heard expert witnesses' evidence from frontline domestic abuse and VAWG organisations across the Thames Valley conducting lifesaving work, in increasingly challenging times.

I would like to thank Matthew Barber, the Police and Crime Commissioner who engaged with the review and provided relevant information for the review on the good work he and his office carries out in relation to VAWG and how he holds the Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police to account in this respect.

On behalf of the Taskforce, I would like to thank these incredible organisations and specialists for the important work and support they provide to victims and survivors daily. I would like to extend the same thanks and acknowledgement to the specialist Thames Valley Police Officers doing this work and especially thank Chief Constable Dennis Murray for making time to attend a Taskforce session and for his openness to answering questions. The Task and Finish Group would also like to highlight the groundbreaking work of Project Vigilance as

best practice work in the Thames Valley, which is being recognised nationally too.

Thanks to all the members of the Task and Finish Group for their commitment to this work. I would like to extend a special thanks to Thames Valley Police's Crime Panel Scrutiny Officer Khalid Ahmed and Oxford City Council's Liz Jones, for all their invaluable input into the work of the group.

The work of the Task and Finish Group has been conducted through the lens of intersectionality, because we understand victims and survivors of VAWG are not treated equally and many struggle to find support and help and face additional barriers to reporting incidents to the police and finding pathways to justice redress, support, and healing.

We ensured the Task and Finish Group centred the voices and myriad of lived experiences of women and girls across the Thames Valley region, by reaching out to as many specialists as possible to attend our sessions so they could give voice to victims and survivors experiences. We are also grateful to students from Cherwell School, Oxford, who attended a session and asked questions. It is important for us to hear the voices of young people and understand how they relate to and understand and experience the issue of VAWG.

The final detailed recommendations as outlined in the report have been co-produced with those who gave testimony in the sessions. I would like

to extend my thanks on behalf of the Task and Finish Group to everyone for all their work.

The devastating kidnap, rape, and murder of Sarah Everard by serving Metropolitan Police Officer Wayne Couzens, and the conduct of Metropolitan police officers over the killings of two Black women and sisters, Biba Henry and Nicole Smallman, are amongst recent high-profile cases of violence against women and girls, impacting women and the wider public's confidence in the Police.

The prosecution of serving police officer and serial rapist David Carrick, who admitted to 85 serious offences against women over the course of his 17-year career as a police officer, further highlights cultures of misogyny and impunity in wider policing. All these cases have rightly turned the spotlight on police attitudes towards Violence against Women and Girls and the internal cultures in policing – also addressed by the work of this Task and Finish Group.

Baroness Louise Casey's Independent Review into the culture, standards, and behaviours of the Metropolitan Police, published in March 2023, concluded that the Metropolitan Police is institutionally racist, sexist and homophobic. The Casey Review's verdict of course has implications for all police forces across the county including Thames Valley Police.

The recent Angiolini Inquiry concluded that "without a significant overhaul (of police cultures and internal systems and operations) there is nothing stop another Wayne Couzens operating in "plain sight".

I hope the key recommendations of the VAWG Task and Finish Group are acted on and provide an opportunity for greater openness, accountability and co-operation between all stakeholders working to tackle violence against women and girls.

Cllr Shaista Aziz, Chair, VAWG Task and Finish Group.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Thames Valley's Police and Crime Commissioner be asked to give consideration to the following recommendations: -

RECOMMENDATION 1: That as Violence against Women and Girls is a recognised term which covers a whole range of violence and abuse such as domestic abuse, rape, sexual violence, indecent exposure etc, the PCC be asked to consider adding Violence against Women and Girls as one of his strategic objectives in his Police and Criminal Justice Plan. [Page 25]

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the PCC be asked what specific guidelines have been issued to TVP Officers in relation to violence against women and girls and use of WhatsApp and other social media platforms. [Page 25]

RECOMMENDATION 3: That there be more clarity on how TVP will implement a culture change amongst officers at every level which eradicates victim blaming, gender microaggressions and sexism. [Page 30]

RECOMMENDATION 4: That a robust training plan be implemented for TVP which enables officers to respond in a trauma informed way and provides an enhanced awareness of how intersectionality influences the experience of victims. [Page 31]

RECOMMENDATION 5: The PCC be asked to recognise the resource issue and the structural barriers that prevent people from underrepresented communities from working effectively to address these issues with the police and other groups and look to address this. [Page 35]

RECOMMENDATION 6: That Thames Valley Police develop a reporting app for victims of low-level sexual offences such as indecent exposure, cyber flashing,

sexual harassment and sexual aggression by unknown offenders to provide intelligence for the police. [Page 41]

RECOMMENDATION 7: That Nighttime Safety Awareness training for Victims be enhanced to schools, colleges, and universities to conduct targeted awareness sessions. Nighttime safety should be a central theme, emphasising precautions and risk reduction strategies. [Page 42]

RECOMMENDATION 8: That consideration be given to using podcast-based training for police officers, working with organisations that work in the prevention of violence against women and girls. [Page 45]

RECOMMENDATION 9: The PCC provide the Police and Crime Panel with regular reports on the effectiveness of the automatic referral process in ensuring victims, irrespective of risk, are being offered appropriate support which includes referrals to specialist services. [Page 50]

RECOMMENDATION 10: Victim's First Adult Service's new provider communicates with all specialist Domestic Abuse services working with victims across Thames Valley to ensure a clear referral pathway for all risk levels. [Page 50]

RECOMMENDATION 11: The OPCC coordinates a working group to develop community-based interventions, for males who chose to abuse their partners and family members, which will elicit long term behavioural change. [Page 50]

Background

At the Police and Crime Panel meeting on 15 September 2023 approval was given to the setting up of a Task and Finish Group to look at how the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) was holding the Chief Constable to account in relation to the strategy for Violence against Women and Girls in Thames Valley.

Councillor Culverhouse, Councillor Lygo, Pamela Mackenzie-Reilly and Councillor Poole, were appointed as Members from the Police and Crime Panel. Additionally, Councillor Shaista Aziz a former Member of the Panel, was appointed as Chair of the Task and Finish Group because of her experience and knowledge in this area.

The review was scoped, and the following terms of reference and objectives were formed:

Objectives and Terms of Reference:

The Task and Finish Group will scrutinise the Police and Crime Commissioner's Police and Criminal Justice Plan to assess his strategy on the measures Thames Valley Police are putting in place to prevent Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG).

It should be noted that the Home Secretary had recently revised the national strategic policing requirement asking that PCCs should have due regard to including VAWG in their Police and Crime Plans because of the national threat of VAWG.

What do we mean by VAWG?

Violence against women and girls, as set out by the United Nations, is any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

It is clear that women and girls are disproportionately affected by these offences, so a specific Strategy is needed to address them.

The Task and Finish Group's terms of reference will be:-

1. To obtain evidence on different forms and experiences of VAWG – for example rape, sexual harassment and abuse, domestic abuse, coercive control, street and online harassment, stalking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and other forms of violence and abuse – and the differences between addressing VAWG in the public and private spheres;
2. How VAWG has changed and the impact modern technology / social media etc has had on VAWG

3. How VAWG affects young women and girls and particular groups such as migrant women, sex workers
4. The support organisations and the PCC's Victims First support service provide, that women and girls turn to for support and help engage with issues relating to VAWG and their role in tackling and preventing it.
5. The work which is being carried out on the prevention of VAWG to assess whether there is sufficient and appropriate support available for victims;
6. To assess how the PCC raises awareness and understanding of domestic violence and abuse and VAWG amongst the general public with the aim of reducing its tolerance of violence towards women and girls and to educate and inform young people, to enable them to construct and maintain relationships built on trust and respect.
7. What the role of organisations and institutions is in the prevention of VAWG (including the police and criminal justice system, schools, colleges and education institutions, employers and trade unions, social media companies, local community and specialist services);
8. To look at the measures detailed in the Police and Criminal Justice which look to counter VAWG and whether further consideration should be given by the PCC to make VAWG one of his main strategic objectives in his Plan.

NB. On 1 March 2023, the Home Secretary included violence against women and girls in the Strategic Policing Requirement (SPR).

WITNESS SESSION ON PCC – WORK ON PREVENTION OF VAWG / POLICE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE PLAN

- **What is the picture in Thames Valley for VAWG?**
- **Do we have specialist teams to deal with rape and sexual offences?**
- **Initiatives in the Thames Valley**
- **Education on preventing VAWG and the role of organisations and institutions in the prevention of VAWG (including criminal justice system, schools, colleges and education institutions, employers and trade unions, social media companies, local community and specialist services);**
- **Reporting of VAWG**
- **Do we collect data on our frontline services from victims, or do we just rely on complaints?**
- **Prosecutions of VAWG**
- **Specialist courts set up to fast-track domestic violence cases through the system – Thames Valley wide?**
- **Do we have data on VAWG as a percentage of total recorded crime, clear up rate and conviction rate? How does it compare to other areas?**
- **Strategy – where does it sit?**

Witnesses: - Matthew Barber - Police and Crime Commissioner, officers from OPCC and Elizabeth Jones - ASBIT Manager & DA Lead (Oxford City Council).

Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner

The Task and Finish Group was presented with a report which set out an overview of the current plans and activities which are in place to tackle Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Thames Valley.

The PCC's Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy has 8 key objectives. Since its launch, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner has:

- Secured £2.8 million from the Home Office's 'Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Interventions Fund' for two projects to reduce domestic abuse and stalking.
- Launched a new specialist service to support stalking victims.
- Funded improved street lighting and CCTV to enhance safety.
- Continued promoting the 'Do the Right Thing' campaign, which encourages men to challenge abusive behaviour and sexual harassment.

Additionally, as part of the Safer Streets Fund initiatives in the Thames Valley region, £500,000 will be allocated to address VAWG. This funding will support various initiatives in Slough, High Wycombe, and Oxford, including:

- Additional Project Vigilant deployments to identify predatory behaviour in the night-time economy.
- Bystander training for workers and volunteers in the night-time economy.
- A schools-based attitudinal/behaviour change program.
- The expansion or establishment of public guardians, such as Street Angels, to support vulnerable individuals during nights out.

These measures aimed to actively combat and prevent violence against women and girls. At the recent White Ribbon Day, the PCC had emphasised the need to challenge and transform behaviours and cultural norms that foster violence against women and girls (VAWG).

The PCC highlighted the devastating impact of crimes like domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking, and harassment on women and girls. There was also recognition of the importance of targeting perpetrators, improving court outcomes, and preventing VAWG by addressing the root causes of violence.

In collaboration with partners and TVP, efforts included initiatives like Project Vigilant to prevent sexual violence, interventions supported by the Safer Streets Fund, and projects funded by the Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Interventions Fund. The PCC's office provides specialised services for stalking victims and encourages men to speak out against abuse through the 'Do the Right Thing' campaign.

Victims First, a critical support service, was highlighted, with the PCC urging those in need to reach out for free assistance, emphasising the service's respectful and sensitive approach.

The PCC referred to Thames Valley Police (TVP) who had established a dedicated **Rape and Sexual Offences (RASO) Team**, under a new Superintendent, about 18 months ago. This team handled significant cases, triaged all incoming cases and reviewed any discontinuation of cases, particularly those marked as 'victim not supporting'. There were various complex reasons why victims may not continue to support prosecutions, and each case was reviewed by a panel within the RASO team to ensure consistency in decision-making.

In addition to the RASO team, there was also a Superintendent-led team for **domestic abuse** that oversaw the work of the Domestic Abuse Investigation Units. They provided support throughout the Force and maintained quality control standards.

Reference was made to work which had been carried out to expedite domestic abuse court cases, with initiatives like the one in Aylesbury, which focused on domestic abuse cases. This had been successful; however, further work was required to be done with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

TVP collaborated with **SAFE**, an organisation supporting child victims. SAFE provided support to children and families around the Thames Valley who have been affected by crime or abuse through one-to-one and group sessions.

Recommendations have been made to the local criminal Justice Board, including the implementation of specialist courts. However, these are not yet running in Thames Valley due to concerns from the judiciary about having enough specialist judges and the geographical challenges of Thames Valley.

The local criminal Justice Board is keen to continue pursuing these actions with the court service and the judiciary. Support is provided for victims through various means, including the rape and sexual assault team, and using Sexual Offences Liaison Officers (SOLOs), who provide a one-to-one link into policing.

The force has also been pursuing evidence-led prosecutions, where there is a public interest in pursuing a prosecution, even if a victim isn't willing to go to court and give evidence. In some cases, it might be possible to pursue the case without the victim, using a section 21 recorded interview and video evidence from the time.

Reference was made to cases where victims may not support the proceedings, but there may be a public interest in pursuing cases against potentially dangerous offenders. The PCC said that care must be taken as it's challenging to proceed without a victim giving evidence and it could affect their confidence.

There was also concern that victims may feel that once they report, the case is taken out of their hands. In the criminal justice system, it's the crown against the individual, not the victim against the offender.

While it's beneficial for the Force to be proactive in evidence-led prosecutions, caution is needed. When people question why cases aren't being pursued despite victim attrition, it's important to remember that cases need to be considered on an individual basis.

Thames Valley Police Approach

From the report which the PCC presented, TVP acknowledges the impact of public scrutiny on policing and has made significant progress in addressing VAWG. Feedback from the community has shaped its **Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2023/2025 strategy**, leading to tangible advancements.

Initiatives included:

- Inclusive workplace measures, such as Healthy Team Culture training for managers, to identify and address inappropriate behaviour.
- The Courageous Conversation Series and a new Sexual Harassment Policy to empower reporting and clarify acceptable behaviour.
- Addressing the impact of sexual and domestic violence on its personnel by establishing support groups and planning a new domestic violence policy.

TVP's efforts have been recognised with awards, including a national award for a partnership with a social media content creator. The force has also hosted officials to showcase its work on VAWG.

Plans for a month of action coincide with White Ribbon Day in November, emphasising ongoing efforts to combat VAWG.

Project Vigilant, launched in Oxford in 2019 to combat sexual offences outside nightlife venues, achieved notable success, leading to its expansion to other areas with Home Office funding. Following high-profile murders, the UK government endorsed its national rollout. The Thames Valley Police's communication strategy focused on clear, sensitive messaging, highlighting the perpetrator, not the victim, to maintain public support during a challenging time for policing. This approach involved engaging key partners, using influencers, and creating digital resource packs for consistent messaging across agencies. Project Vigilant's success is attributed to effective and strategic communication efforts.

TVP's Service Improvement Review guided Thames Valley Police's strategy to address Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) in response to high-profile incidents like the murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021.

The report, structured around NPCC pillars, identified both strengths and areas for improvement. There were positive aspects in the response to VAWG offenses, but there were also challenges such as issues in different crime categories and inconsistencies in offender management. Internally, fostering confidence to report concerns and addressing perceived negative consequences were identified as priorities.

The efforts to support victims were acknowledged, with recommendations for enhanced oversight and data quality. Despite areas for improvement, the review acknowledged the existing high-quality work to tackle VAWG offenses and emphasized the need for continued oversight and coordination.

Reference was made to TVP'S 2-year VAWG Delivery Plan (2023-25) which focused on three key pillars: Trust and Confidence (Internal & External), Relentless Perpetrator Pursuit, and Safer Spaces.

The plan outlined strategies for 2023/24 to address sexual misconduct and violence, with a focus on improved communication, awareness, and support. This included initiatives like Op Reassure and Healthy Team Culture Training.

Specific actions included progressing with the White Ribbon Action plan, engaging with scrutineers for transparency, and conducting focus groups for victims, especially those from 'Seldom Heard' groups.

Project Vigilant aims to enhance officer arrest confidence, while Supt DVPO Training focuses on consistency and early identification.

The plan also emphasised identifying and managing high-harm individuals, partnership working, and initiatives to enhance safety in educational settings. There is a targeted focus on VAWG within private settings, extending beyond traditional definitions of domestic abuse. This approach reflected a commitment to a comprehensive and inclusive strategy in addressing these critical issues.

Issues Raised

- **The effectiveness of domestic abuse specialist courts** - The PCC reported that the only issue had been timings and delays in these processes. Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDAC) often included cases of domestic abuse. These courts take an interventionist approach, involving parents in weekly updates on their drug treatment, leading to improved success rates in keeping children with parents. There were FDAC's in Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire, and efforts are underway to establish such courts in Berkshire and Oxfordshire. Agreement had been given to the funding of a post to help establish a court in Berkshire, and subject to the County Council's approval the PCC would do the same for Oxfordshire. The importance of these courts was emphasised

in addressing domestic abuse, breaking the cycle of violence, and keeping families together.

- **Reporting of VAWG** - Do we collect data on our frontline services from victims, or do we just rely on complaints. Can women be confident that reports are always taken seriously? – There were complexities in the crime reporting with interpreting crime statistics challenging due to various factors. There had been an upward trend in crime reporting over time, which was attributed partly to increased confidence in the system and partly to cultural shifts in reporting thresholds.

Reference was made to societal attitudes which have changed over the years, towards reporting certain types of behaviour, such as inappropriate comments towards women in public. These changes have made it difficult to accurately assess the impact on crime reporting rates.

In relation to the reporting of rape, particularly in the context of domestic abuse, there had been an increase in rape reports over the last 12 months, with a significant portion of these cases being handled by the domestic abuse investigation unit.

There were challenges around charge rates and victim support, especially when the victim may not want a historic rape to be investigated. The decision to investigate should be left to the victim, unless there is a public interest element or wider risk to others.

Increased reporting could be a sign of increased confidence among victims to come forward. However, this was difficult to quantify due to various factors such as changing thresholds and genuine increases in crime.

There were other types of data that are considered in policing, including complaints made to the police and ongoing investigations. The work which took place with voluntary groups and Commission services, provided additional statistics about prevalence. However, it was difficult to use these statistics as performance measures due to lack of control and the risk of double counting.

Data was used from Victim Support services, which provided insights into volumes and trends of offences for people seeking assistance.

- **Engagement in Education establishments** - The Office of the PCC and the Force had established school officers in every local area and have dedicated contacts in the balance reduction unit. There was good work taking place, especially in violence reduction, but there did need to be more strategic planning.

The “Do the Right Thing” campaign also involved work in schools. Reference was made to the work being put together by the mother of a murdered rape victim, Libby Squires, which will be introduced in schools. However, it was acknowledged that there needed to be better co-ordination of the educational work to ensure there was no duplication.

Project Vigilant, which is the work in the night time economy started off in Oxford, and which looked for people displaying predatory behaviour has been effective in terms of detection of people. This has been a popular programme in terms of restoring confidence because people have seen that the police are out in town centres.

Sharon Gaffker, a participant on the Love Island Reality TV show and a huge social media presence was involved in a big campaign on drink spiking and was a positive presence on social media promoting the campaign.

The PCC was asked about the **effectiveness of the work being done with schools**, particularly in relation to prevention efforts. What were the impact of these efforts and whether the messages delivered in schools are retained beyond a short period. Was there a mapping or planning process that guides what is being done and why. Was there targeting done of specific schools, particularly those with high instances of sexual offences or domestic abuse?

The PCC replied that there was theatre work funded a few years ago, targeted at schools with specific issues related to sexting. The “Choices” programme was run in certain schools, which provided consistent education from years five through to eight, helping students navigate the transition from primary to secondary school.

However, there was room for improvement in these efforts. There was a need for a wider review next year to ensure the consistency of the message being delivered and to gain buy-in from the schools.

It was acknowledged that education was a really important part of tackling violence against women and girls. It was positive that police officers were linked with schools. However, it was acknowledged that there should be more of a co-ordinated effort, particularly with the voluntary sector who also went into schools.

- **Working with national governing bodies** such as working with Girls Football Leagues, for example. The PCC reported that work did take place with individual football clubs, rather than Leagues. Work took place through child safeguarding, which was the statutory responsibility of local authorities, however, collaboration work needed to take place, it was not just a policing issue.

- **Implications of the Casey Review, Misogyny and Race** – The PCC reported the Casey Reports findings were reported to TVP’s Chief Management Team. An internal staff survey was conducted to understand the experiences of TVP staff, both in the workplace and personally. There were challenges with this process, given the anonymous nature of the survey and the potential implications of the responses. Work was taking place with minority groups and working with some of the leaders within some of the organisations and charities that provide particularly support, to build that trust for people to contact the police.

Anti-Social Behaviour Investigation Team Manager & Domestic Abuse Lead – Oxford City Council

Reference was made to SAFE! Support for Young People Affected by Crime which was originally set up in 2008 as the Oxfordshire Young Victims of Crime Project by a multi-agency team who were concerned that the needs of young victims were not being met and children were left isolated and unsupported, leading to further issues.

SAFE! has grown into a regional charity providing a range of services for children, young people and families around the Thames Valley, including through a contract with the PCC to young victims of crime. SAFE! now supports over 1200 children a year through that contract, and over 50% have experienced sexual harm or domestic abuse.

Practitioners have always done their best to support children and families with understanding the criminal justice process but in 2019 SAFE! received funding from the Ministry of Justice to employ a dedicated Children’s Independent Domestic & Sexual Violence Advisor (ChIDSVA), and now has one per county supporting children and families where there is an ongoing criminal justice process following an experience of sexual or domestic abuse.

The SAFE! ChIDSVA team are currently supporting over 150 children going through the criminal justice process following an experience of sexual harm or domestic abuse

Reference was made to the SAFE! Report on “Living in Limbo: the impact of delays in the criminal justice system on young victims of crime” which highlighted some of the issues that young people are finding in their experiences of the criminal justice system and the impact that this is having on their lives.

There was a statutory duty on local authorities to provide safe accommodation following the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Funding was provided for this purpose, and local authorities decided what to support based on a needs assessment.

The focus was predominantly on domestic abuse, with fewer specialist services for sexual violence, stalking, and honour-based abuse. There was a specialist service within “Victims First” and other sexual violence services around the Thames Valley.

There were an increasing number of people coming forward, influenced by media, movements like “Me Too”, and increased awareness. However, not all those who come forward go on to report to the police.

Reference was made to the BAMER report from 2020, which took the voices of women from minority communities across the Thames Valley, asking about their experiences of abuse and violence to inform the recommendations. There was low confidence in the criminal justice system and the pandemic had an impact on court proceedings. The specialist courts and fast-tracking of domestic abuse cases was well supported.

The challenges faced by the Crown Prosecution Service and the police were acknowledged, particularly in the context of recent media scrutiny.

It was important to support victims of violence against women and girls, including cases of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and modern slavery. Included in this were sex workers.

There needed to be a stronger criminal justice system, not just from the police but throughout the entire process. There was an element of a loss of control to victims, when they have reported incidents to the police, and the potential for feeling disbelieved, especially among children and young people.

There was a need to focus on perpetrators, particularly children and young people who display sexually harmful behaviours.

The Task and Finish Group was informed that generally, the understanding of honour-based abuse, stalking, harassment, and the impact on children was poor amongst rank and file police officers. However, there has been significant work to improve this understanding, including training through SafeLives.

The importance of the use of language was emphasised, criticising the phrase “the victim is not supporting” as victim-blaming. It was suggested that frontline police officers needed more training to understand the complexities of these issues, particularly in cases of violence against women and girls where evidence may not be as clear-cut as in other crimes.

The Police needed to understand and respond appropriately to victims who may also be part of minority or LGBT communities. There needed to be more focus on these elements to build confidence among victims who may feel misunderstood due to their culture or sexuality.

Issues Raised

- **Domestic Abuse Courts** – With the establishment of these specialist courts around 2007-2008, court clerks and magistrates were trained on domestic abuse. These cases were treated as priority in magistrates’ courts, leading to potentially better outcomes. These courts were still running, but there were questions about their effectiveness, especially since COVID. It was important that there was the need for training and knowledge on domestic abuse and sexual violence amongst all court personnel, not just judges.
- There needed to be a review of domestic abuse courts and consideration should be given to the establishment of specialist sexual violence courts. There were of course challenges in the criminal justice system, but there was a need to find solutions rather than focusing on obstacles.
- The measures put in place to support victims, such as screens and video evidence were supported.
- **Intersectionality** - Additional barriers and challenges women who were subjected to domestic abuse and violence struggled with – Reference was made to the ongoing engagement with community groups to encourage reporting of incidents to the police or specialist services. Mention was made of the organization “Oxford Against Cutting”, which initially focused on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) but has expanded its scope and now works across the Thames Valley, raising awareness in schools and lobbying proactively.
- It was important to engage with minority communities and the efforts of organisations to provide training and improve data collection around these communities was acknowledged. There was value of community groups passing on knowledge to their communities in a way that respects their language and culture. More work needed to be done. It was important to give consideration to all aspects of a person’s identity, including language, cultural background, employment status, and disability, in these efforts.

The Chair of the Task and Finish Group shared her experience of working with an individual who had insecure immigration status and was recently granted asylum. There was a risk of violence to the individual and the response from the Police was quick and understanding and they were able to assist the individual promptly.

WITNESS SESSION ON CULTURE IN THAMES VALLEY POLICE

- **The Casey Review identified the Met's corporate failure to understand the importance of a specialist approach to sexual offences. Might the same be said of TV Police?**
- **Use of WhatsApp Groups & Social Media**
- **How to achieve the highest standard of ethical values & culture, both internally & with the public**
- **Training given to officers on treating women with respect in the workplace and externally**
- **Guidance and awareness training for line managers on what constitutes sexual misconduct, misogyny etc.**
- **Work on rooting out officers and staff showing inappropriate behaviours that contradict TVP values**
- **Ensure easy access to information on how to report inappropriate behaviour / misogyny and VAWG**
- **TV Police perpetrated sexual misconduct and domestic abuse – What are the levels and handling of them?**

Witnesses: Matthew Barber PCC and Elizabeth Jones - ASBIT Manager & DA Lead (Oxford City Council).

Introduction

The Chair explained that this witness session was to look at the culture of TVP. Reference was made to the growing public concern about misogyny in the police force and other institutions, especially after the tragic murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer.

This was not only a devastating loss for Sarah's family and everyone who cares about ending violence against women and girls, but also a shock for many police officers.

One of the questions we want to explore is how the police plan to address misogyny and the culture of violence against women and girls within the force. Mention was made of the Casey Review, which exposed the Metropolitan Police's failure to understand the importance of a specialist approach to sexual offences. The Casey Review also suggested that other police forces should examine their own cultures as well.

Therefore, the session will focus on the internal and external cultures of TVP, and how they affect the public and the women who work in the police, not only as officers, but also as part of the wider force. Information will be sought on how police officers are disciplined, and how the behaviours that need to be tackled are being rooted out.

Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner

The Task and Finish Group was presented with a report which gave an overview of the current plans and activities that are in place to tackle Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Thames Valley.

The paper primarily focused on cultural issues of Thames Valley Police and provided a range of evidence that demonstrated positive outcomes, awareness and continual improvement.

The Casey Review and TV Police's Approach to Sexual Offences:

The Casey Review exposed the Metropolitan Police's lack of a specialist approach to sexual offences and suggested that other police forces should also review their cultures and practices.

TVP has conducted a corporate assessment based on the Casey Review and has engaged with external and internal partners to improve its response to sexual offences. TVP has implemented innovative strategies, such as the Specialist Approach Forum and the Sexual Offences Task Force, to learn from experts, review cases, and enhance procedures.

TVP has also participated in national initiatives to address sexual offences and has committed to tackling violence against women and girls and ensuring respect for women in the force.

Use of WhatsApp Groups & Social Media

TVP's Corporate Communications social media policy is part of its commitment to professional standards and internal trust. This policy, along with the Electronic Communication Policy, sets the same standards for online and offline behaviour of employees. It also holds them accountable for what they post online, showing TVP's transparency and ethics.

To make this policy more effective, TVP offers training sessions for staff on responsible social media use. These sessions are based on the "Digital Etiquette Program," an innovative project that teaches digital professionalism. TVP evaluates the results of these sessions through surveys and feedback and uses them to improve the policy and guidelines.

TVP partnered with Social Media Influencer (Sharon Gaffka) on Violence Against Women and Girls and received recognition from the National Police Chiefs' Council and College of Policing.

Achieving the Highest Standard of Ethical Values & Culture

TVP is committed to ethical values and culture, both internally and externally, and works to create a positive and inclusive organisation that builds trust and confidence with the community.

TVP has launched a “Culture of Respect” campaign, which involves assessing the current culture and identifying areas for improvement and developing training modules and workshops to instil ethical values in every employee. TVP has also created an “Ethical Leadership Forum,” where leaders from different departments share insights and strategies for ethical values and influence the ongoing improvement of TVP’s Code of Ethics.

Training for Officers on Respectful Treatment of Women

TVP trains its officers to treat women respectfully, as part of its culture of respect. The training programme covers various scenarios and case studies and includes a “Gender Sensitivity Training Module” developed with external partners. TVP also has a mentorship program and feedback mechanisms to support and improve the training program.

Guidance and Awareness Training for Line Managers

Line managers are key to shaping the culture of TVP. They receive guidance and training to uphold ethical values and respect in their teams. This helps create a positive and supportive work environment.

TVP also runs a “Leadership for Inclusive Culture” program for line managers. This program teaches them how to foster inclusive and respectful team dynamics, using classroom sessions, case studies, and peer-learning forums. The program’s outcomes are measured by 360-degree evaluations, which provide feedback for individual and collective improvement.

Another initiative is the “Guidance Champions Network,” which consists of line managers who excel at promoting guidance and awareness. This network supports each other by sharing success stories, discussing challenges, and solving problems together. This way, they enhance the impact of TVP’s initiatives across all departments.

Addressing Inappropriate Behaviours Contradicting TVP Values

TVP has a “Professional and Ethical Standards Panel (PESP)” that reviews investigations and sanctions and makes recommendations for policy and prevention.

TVP also has a “Speak Up” campaign that encourages employees to report inappropriate behaviours, and an annual “Integrity Day” that reminds them of ethical conduct.

Ensuring Easy Access to Reporting Mechanisms

TVP makes it easy for people to report inappropriate behaviours, which helps prevent and resolve misconduct issues. TVP offers various reporting channels, such as an online portal, helpline, and contact persons, and informs staff about them regularly. TVP also works with external organisations to provide independent reporting options.

Handling TV Police Perpetrated Sexual Misconduct and Domestic Abuse

TVP is committed to addressing police-perpetrated sexual misconduct and domestic abuse, and has robust procedures, a specialised unit, and external partnerships for handling such cases.

The impact of its VAWG activity is being measured, and has internal and external trust and confidence measures, such as surveys, forums, networks, collaborations, and communications.

TVP has a social media policy that sets the same standards for online and offline behaviour of employees and provides training and awareness on responsible social media use.

TVP's top three updates for Quarter 3 2023-24 are: engaging the Behavioural Science Unit, rolling out Healthy Team Culture Training, and gaining insight into LPA delivery of internal trust and confidence actions.

Issues Raised

- In response to further information on **what TVP has done in relation to the Casey Review**, it was reported that the TVP internal assessment categorised the Casey Review recommendations into three groups: those that are specific to the Met, those that are general, and those that are not directly applicable to TVP but still useful to learn from.

In relation to the command structures of the Met and TVP, TVP's command areas are smaller and more manageable than the Met's, which Casey criticised for being too large and distant from the resources on the ground.

Some of the internal forums and initiatives that TVP has set up to address the issues raised by the Casey Review, such as the sexual offences task force, the dedicated specialist resource, and the violence against women and girls' strategy.

There had been a confidential survey that TVP conducted to understand the experience of domestic abuse among its staff, and there had been challenges and

limitations of that survey, such as the difficulty of identifying and reporting perpetrators who may be police officers themselves.

The PCC reported that he was confident that TVP was not institutionally misogynistic, homophobic, or racist. There had been a lot of work and commitment by the officers to uphold the law and protect the public. However, it was acknowledged that there might still be some individuals within the organisation who were not suitable and that they would not want them to be there. The Chief Constable ultimately is responsible for discipline and will continue to remove people from the organisation, take disciplinary action and take criminal action when necessary.

Out of an organisation of around 10,000, which included contractors, it was inevitable that there would be unsuitable people in the workforce.

- There was a **new reporting line run by Crime Stoppers**, a respected independent charity that allowed people to report crimes anonymously. This new reporting line would be helpful because it would be external and independent. The PCC said that some of the numbers of complaints against police officers for violence against women and girls (VAWG) were sometimes misleading, because they included cases of legitimate use of force that were not misogynistic or abusive.

Police officers needed to use force as part of their job, but they also needed to do it appropriately and be taken seriously when they faced complaints. Not every complaint against a police officer is valid or supported by evidence. Police officers often face complaints from criminals who are unhappy with how they were handled. Some of these complaints are about the use of force, which is sometimes necessary for arrests. However, publishing these figures as if they were accusations of violence against women, implying some sexual motive, is misleading and unhelpful for the public debate. The underreporting of the real serious cases needed to be acknowledged, but there needed to be an understanding of the nuances of the different situations.

- The PCC was asked how could **partner agencies help with misogyny** and its subtle forms from police officers and how should it be reported.

The PCC reported that the best way for partner agencies to report any concerns is through the complaints process. A complaint against an officer could be made to the force through the Professional Standards Department (PSD), or to the Office of the PCC. If anonymity was wanted, Crime Stoppers could be used.

- **To address the issue of misogyny in the police culture, especially the victim blaming language** and behaviours that are often used.

The PCC responded by saying they TVP were happy to hear any concerns and raise them with senior officers. Reference was made to Project Vigilant, an initiative that targets perpetrators of sexual violence in the night-time economy, as an example of how the force is trying to avoid victim blaming.

Reference was made to recent press releases in the last few years where women have been told to be more vigilant when they're out and about on the streets.

Background to this is after the murder of Sarah Everard, the Metropolitan Police advised women in the Clapham area to stay at home and avoid walking alone at night. This sparked protests and criticism from campaigners who said this was victim blaming and restricting women's freedom.

The issue of gender-based violence and harassment in the police force was raised, and how it is often difficult to capture and report. It was suggested to the PCC, that the police should listen to the voices of women and other marginalised groups and be sensitive to their feelings and experiences. The captured data would not include comments or jokes made to women which made them feel uncomfortable.

It was proposed that focus groups and informal chats could be a way of collecting more qualitative data on the culture and attitudes of the police.

- Further information was given on the **training and development initiatives that TVP** has implemented to promote gender sensitivity and ethical leadership among its officers and staff. There had been increasing diversity of the new police recruits, who are now roughly 50/50 male and female, and this would improve the culture and performance of the force. It would take time for the new recruits to reflect the senior and operational ranks, which are still predominantly male, but the PCC said that TVP has a good representation of women in those roles compared to other forces.

The age profile of the officers and staff is another factor that affects the gender balance, as the older cohorts have a different mix than the newer ones.

- The Chair of the Task and Finish Group said consideration needed to be given to **intersectionality** aspect of this issue. It is not enough to have more women in the police or to achieve gender balance in the force. We also need to think about how women of colour face additional barriers and challenges in their careers. For instance, if women of colour are more likely to quit or be forced out of the police, they will have fewer opportunities to advance to higher ranks. This is another problem which needs to be addressed.

Training on intersectionality is very important. Intersectionality is how different factors such as gender, sexuality, race, and class affect people's experiences of

discrimination and privilege. Training on this, can help officers to understand themselves and others better, especially the people they serve, whether they are offenders or victims. It can help them to empathise with their situations and perspectives. I think any training is beneficial, but I think more can be done to improve it.

- **The Use of WhatsApp** – Reference was made to the issue of online violence against women and girls, especially the case of two black women who were murdered in a park in London and their images were circulated on WhatsApp by Met Police officers with racist comments. There was public concern about how police officers are using WhatsApp groups, and the PCC was asked about the use of WhatsApp in TVP.

Response

- TVP has a clear policy that the online conduct of officers and staff is an extension of their professional conduct, and that they cannot use WhatsApp or any other platform to say things that are inappropriate or offensive. There was a challenge about visibility and monitoring of the WhatsApp groups, and that the force is using WhatsApp for some positive purposes, such as engaging with the public on rural crime issues.
- **The PCC was asked about his views on the use of the term of VAWG**

The PCC replied that he did not condone any form of violence or harassment against women, and he agreed that some people's attitudes are linked to these crimes. However, he did have a problem with using the term VAWG to describe such crimes, because he thought it ignores the differences in how these are dealt with from an operational policing perspective. For example, domestic abuse is the biggest risk for women, and it requires a different approach than safety in the night-time economy, where there were initiatives like Project Vision.

Some offenders may target women in general, but some may only harm their partners. The PCC commented that there needed to be more nuance and specifics in how these issues are tackled, and not treat them all the same.

Reference was made to a meeting he had attended where some people had suggested that child abuse images should be included in the term "org", which stands for "offences related to girls". He disagreed with this idea because he thought it was too simplistic and misleading.

The PCC explained that about 24% of the child abuse images on the dark web involved young boys, not just girls. He said that ignoring the male victims would be unfair, and that using the term "org" would make people think that all child abuse images were the same. He said that there was a wide range of child abuse images, from self-

generated ones by teenagers to violent rape of children and babies. He said that using a single term for all these crimes would not help to address them effectively.

The ASBIT Manager & DA Lead at Oxford City Council commented that VAWG is rooted in the inequality and objectification of women and girls by certain men, who see them as sexual objects or victims.

It was acknowledged that there are also male victims and female perpetrators, but most cases involve male offenders and female survivors. She also pointed out the influence of the porn industry, which is very misogynistic and encourages young people to share their own images online, exposing them to risks of exploitation and abuse.

In conclusion the current system is not fit for purpose and fails to deliver justice for VAWG victims, regardless of the police efforts.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That as Violence against Women and Girls is a recognised term which covers a whole range of violence and abuse such as domestic abuse, rape, sexual violence, indecent exposure etc, the PCC be asked to consider adding Violence against Women and Girls as one of his strategic objectives in his Police and Criminal Justice Plan.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the PCC be asked what specific guidelines have been issued to TVP Officers in relation to violence against women and girls and use of WhatsApp and other social media platforms.

WITNESS SESSION ON RACE

- **Recognising the impact of the intersecting inequalities which leave Black and minoritised women more likely to experience violence and less able to access support, attention and justice**
- **coercive behaviour, domestic violence, caused patriarchal structures in some cultures.**
- **Training given to police officers on dealing with VAWG (Black and Minorities)**
- **Work carried out with Women's organisations, Charities etc.**
- **How to empower Black and Minority women them to report VAWG.**

Witnesses: Dennis Murray – Assistant Chief Constable, Lead for VAWG, Calvin Wilson - Chair of Thames Valley Police's Independent Scrutiny and Oversight Board, a number of students from Cherwell School and Elizabeth Jones - ASBIT Manager & DA Lead at Oxford City Council.

Introduction

The Chair explained that this witness session was to recognise how intersecting inequalities expose Black and minoritised women to more violence without access, support, attention, and justice. It would also look at how men use threats, physical abuse, and social norms to control and harm women and how these factors affect women of colour and the police culture.

Dennis Murray, Assistant Chief Constable TVP, Lead for Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

The Task and Finish Group was informed that he oversaw various work streams and portfolios related to serving victims, race action, women of colour in policing, and diversity and inclusion.

The Assistant Chief Constable reported that he worked on various issues related to violence against women and girls, domestic abuse, misogyny, and race. TVP was a White Ribbon force, which means they have pledged to prevent and challenge violence against women and girls.

TVP was addressing the intersectionality of race and gender and consult with minority communities and the rights of Quality Commission to improve their race action plan. There was a need to develop this area of work.

Partnerships have been established with different people and organisations to address these problems. Reference was made to the work which has taken place with Sharon Gaffka, a Love Island contestant and a minority woman, who helped him engage with the younger community. He also mentioned the National Car Parks Association, the Safety Centre in Milton Keynes, Fatima Whitbread, a former javelin champion and a care leaver, and Libby Squire's mother Lisa, who all collaborated with him on various initiatives to create safer spaces, educate students, divert young people from crime, and support victims of violence.

The importance of intersectionality was stressed and the role of the PCC and the victim services in his work.

Work took place with the Suzy Lamplugh Trust which is a UK charity that aims to reduce the risk and prevalence of abuse, aggression, and violence, especially stalking and harassment, through education, campaigning, and support.

There was an Anti-Harassment and Bystander Training which was developed by the Trust to empower people to intervene and support victims of street and public harassment, using the 5 D's method: distract, delegate, document, direct, and delay.

The National VAWG Conference was an event held by the Trust in November 2023 to raise awareness and share best practices on tackling violence against women and girls. It featured speakers from the police, the CPS, the PCC, and the victims' commissioner, as well as experts and survivors of stalking and harassment. The tragic Sarah Everard case was discussed.

The Metropolitan Police were invited to share their insights on the Sarah Everard case and the lessons learned from it. The CPS prosecutor in that case, gave a detailed account of the prosecution process and the challenges faced.

A prevention and awareness strategy has been developed to reach out to the communities that are under-served or under-represented. As part of that, a focus was taking place on interventions in schools and colleges, as well as groups of women who are seldom heard, such as Gypsy and Roma travellers, black and minority ethnic women, disabled women and girls, and LGBTQ+ women.

It is expected this focus will increase the demand for services in the next few years, as there was an aim to reduce the underreporting of violence against women and girls. Attention was being paid to the specific needs of different areas of policing. For example, TVP have identified people who are deaf or have speech impairments as a vulnerable group that require more effective engagement. It was also recognised that there was a need to adapt officer training to include more content on violence against women and girls.

Student officers receive four hours of training on honour-based violence, female genital mutilation, and forced marriage, using case studies and cultural awareness. However, there was a challenge of keeping up with the new legislation that is constantly emerging, such as the new strangulation offence.

TVP were using e-learning and other methods to keep up knowledge of the changes.

Reference was made to a range of civil and criminal orders that can be used to protect victims of violence against women and girls. There are 41 different types of orders that TVP can apply for or enforce.

TVP were addressing the issue of misogyny in policing by providing mandatory training, surveys, and courageous conversations with staff. Complaints of sexism at a low threshold were recorded to ensure transparency and accountability. There were staff support networks, such as the Thames Valley Police women's network, which promote diversity and inclusion.

There was an internal support group for staff who have experienced sexual violence or abuse. TVP's plan to tackle violence against women and girls has been shared with other forces and there has been positive feedback.

TVP has also launched a race action plan, which aims to make policing anti-racist and reform or explain race disparities. TVP conducted surveys to measure victim satisfaction, but there was a limit to the number of questions which can be asked. National data on violence against women and girls was not published.

Four Key Pillars of Race Action Plan



Works takes place with frontline services and multi-agency safeguarding meetings to prevent gaps in the system. It was acknowledged that there was difficulty of reporting violence and there was the need for funding and scrutiny to ensure the delivery of the plans.

The PCC has funded a new role of Trust and Confidence Support Officer to work with the force and improve TVP's trust and confidence with the public and who can ensure that the PCC's views are reflected in TVP's policy making from the start, rather than having to adjust later.

Addressing the intersectionality of race and violence against women and girls was still at the early stages of this work, but this year this was to be focused on, to try to close the gap and achieve better outcomes.

There was a key gap, in that there is a lack of understanding and reporting of the effects of violence against women and girls within some communities that are often labelled as hard to reach by the police. TVP were discussing how they can engage with these communities in a way that suits their needs and preferences, and how they can address the issues of VAWG and gangs. There have been initiatives and achievements that have been made in this area, such as community mapping, development plans, awareness events, and recruitment. There was an importance of accountability and delivery of the race action plan.

Issues Raised

- **There were challenges and opportunities of engaging with faith-based communities, especially women, who may face violence, discrimination, and under-representation. How can the police avoid relying on the same gatekeepers and broaden their outreach?**

Assistant Chief Constable shared his experience of dealing with conflicts and mistrust within and between different communities, such as Sikhs, Somalis, and Christians. He explained how the police are developing their Race Action Plan, which aims to improve the representation, respect, involvement, and protection of diverse communities. He also mentioned the role of the Independent Scrutiny and Oversight Board, which will hold the police accountable for delivering the plan. He stressed the importance of building formalised links and partnerships with various community groups and leaders, and not just hearing one voice or version of the truth.

- **Based on the Casey review and everything that came out of that is Thames Valley Police institutionally racist and misogynistic?**

Assistant Chief Constable referred to the National Black Police Association evaluated the force against the fifteen hallmarks of an institutional racist organisation, and they found four areas of concern: disproportionality in the use of powers, retention of minority staff, listening circles, and external scrutiny representation.

TVP is addressing these issues through dedicated resources, partnerships, and accountability. TVP is leading the way nationally in terms of its commitment and investment in racial justice. Using the institutional debate is a distraction from the real issue of taking action to fix the racial disparities.

The older officers and staff have seen the improvement over the years, while the younger ones are more influenced by the national narrative. Assistant Chief Constable expressed his concern about the potential backlash or complacency of declaring the force as institutionally racist or not, without taking concrete action to address the racial disparities. He had declined the offer to lead the national Race Action Plan, because he believes that TVP has more buy-in and commitment to deliver meaningful change.

- **Within TVP, in relation to black and minority races, is there a perception that crimes and violence against women and girls can feel really normalised and officers do not really understand that?**

Any organisation has some people who understand this issue and some who do not. If you look at the general population, regardless of race or gender, the average person suffers 20 to 30 domestic abuse incidents before they even think of calling the police. It is an underreported area and TVP was aware of that.

However, it does get even more difficult when you deal with some cultures where women are expected to obey their men because of the way their society is structured. Some communities are difficult to reach because their community does not trust the police, and they have this patriarchal and hierarchical system that keeps them silent.

There is endurance of more abuse before they report it which makes it difficult for the police to help them.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That there be more clarity on how TVP will implement a culture change amongst officers at every level which eradicates victim blaming, gender microaggressions and sexism.

- **Trust and confidence is a big issue for some communities. What is being done to improve this? How is TVP ensuring that victims of crime get more support?**

TVP is working on a trust and confidence strategy, which will define what it means and how they will deliver it. There were hopes to see more reporting of crime, especially rape and serious sexual offences, which are currently underreported due to the lack of trust and confidence in the criminal justice process. Praise was given to the role of the PCC, who chairs the local criminal justice board, and who can hold the other agencies to account and call out any issues. He says that more reporting will indicate that people have more confidence in the police force.

There needed to be an improvement in detection rates and making sure there was justice for the victims. The Assistant Chief Constable wanted to see this happen in the next two or three years when the strategies should be part of normal work and there should be no delays.

In the long term, there cannot be just programmes that depend on funding, it needed to be part of TVP culture, so that victims are not let down.

- **To increase crime reporting, does TVP have enough resources to handle it? If crime reporting goes up by 30% or 40%, can TVP cope with it?**

The response given was that every year, TVP had to decide what to prioritise. Reference was made to the force review, which was looking at making savings of £20 million from a half a billion-pound budget.

TVP's three aims were to manage demand, improve service, and save money. 38 police officers had been added to child protection and superintendents had been assigned to rape and domestic abuse cases.

Neighbourhood policing numbers were increasing by 150, which was crucial for building trust and confidence. TVP want people to come forward when they are victims of crime.

TVP has a resilient model for the next two years and a plan for the next 10 years. However, everything is a trade-off, and resources may be shifted as new challenges arise.

The Assistant Chief Constable was confident that TVP had a balanced budget and the right priorities.

- **What will the impact on the resources be with the reduction of 11 Local Policing Areas (LPA) to 5?**

The Assistant Chief Constable replied that the new model will let TVP move resources between areas. For example, if domestic abuse is busy, but CID is not, they will be deployed if there was a domestic abuse incident.

Resources will be moved around to help with the demand which local BCU commander can do. Working with partners such as local authorities and communities would be key to moving forward.

- There was a need for a commitment to ending violence against women and girls, and considering race and other factors that affect their experiences. Oxford City Council had written a report on minority communities with the PCC, which found that Thames Valley has poor data on ethnicity. There was difficulty in collecting data on ethnicity, the problem of victim blaming, and the importance of a trauma-informed response.

How will the biases and culture change in TVP and what were the challenges and solutions for changing this for the staff and the services?

The police are trying to improve their trust and confidence with the public by being fair, respectful, and trauma informed. TVP are implementing a strategy based on procedural justice, which is the idea that people should be treated in a fair and just way from the first contact, to improve their compliance and outcomes.

TVP also needed to be a trauma-informed organisation, which is one that operates with an understanding of trauma and its negative effects on the organisation's employees and the communities it serves and works to mitigate those effects.

It was important to have the data and narrative to understand and address the issues of disproportionality and legitimacy in policing. There was a pilot project to record traffic stops, which are seen by some communities to circumvent stop and search.

The recording of the ethnicity of the driver is crucial, and that it can be either self-defined or perceived by the officer. This compared to the dash assessments for domestic abuse, where some questions can be answered by the officer if the victim does not want to.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That a robust training plan be implemented for TVP which enables officers to respond in a trauma informed way and provides an enhanced awareness of how intersectionality influences the experience of victims.

- There were challenges faced by the third sector, who were struggling financially and that the pathway for victims and survivors is complicated in Thames Valley, which is a large and diverse area. **How much work is taking place with the third sector** to help TVP? Third sector needed support to take the pressure off the police who were not a support service.

TVP works with the Safety Centre, which is a charity that educates children and adults on how to prevent accidents and injuries. They received funding from the PCC's Community Fund, which is a grant scheme run by the Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley to support community groups that help to prevent crime and keep communities safe.

Reference was made to a research project with Stafford University on the under-representation of women of colour in policing and how to engage them to join the force. The Police cannot police their way out of all the issues but needed to work with different partners and the public.

- **Stop and search** is a very difficult issue, especially for black communities. It affects how much they trust the police and whether they report crimes to them. There are also terrible issues like county lines, where drug gangs exploit and traffic children and vulnerable adults. There have seen some shocking cases of this in Oxford and Thames Valley.

Consideration needs to be given as to how the race action plan and the violence against women and girls strategy are linked to these policing issues. It needs to be recognised that some communities, especially those who are racialised, are more likely to be victims of these crimes. This has an impact on how they view the police and how willing they are to work with them.

There is a new group that will review the use of police powers, led by Chief Superintendent Ben Clark, who has joined from the Metropolitan Police. The group will examine the use of stop and search, use of force, and other coercive powers, as well as the criminal justice system. The Assistant Chief Constable stated that he did not think there is a problem with disproportionality in terms of victims, but rather a lack of reporting from some communities.

There was an issue of disproportionality in intelligence collection and stop and search, especially in areas with diverse populations. There needed to be a more accurate way of measuring how the power of stop and search is used, and whether it is based on reliable intelligence or biased assumptions.

There needed to be scrutiny and transparency of the data, both internally and externally, to identify and address any problems.

- A young woman who attended the meeting as a witness, shared her experience of **being in a household where domestic violence took place and how the police responded to it**. She feels that she was not listened to or taken seriously by the police, because she was a child and a girl. It was asked what the standard procedure is for the police when they are called to deal with different types of crime, especially violence against women, girls, or minority ethnicities. Did the police talk to the victims privately or together, and if they shared what each person said?

The Assistant Chief Constable replied that listening to the voice of the child in cases of domestic violence was very important. He says that children are often the silent victims who suffer trauma and need support. Police officers needed to see beyond the obvious and check the welfare of the children in the house, as well as the adults. Policing has changed a lot in the past 20 years and that officers should speak to the children and get their side of the story.

The voice of a child agenda is very much on policing radar and TVP was working towards it.

- How do the police deal with a more private situation, like **when a woman claims her husband is abusing her, but she does not want the police to confront him in front of her?** What is the best way to handle that? What kind of training do the police have to approach such a sensitive situation?

In response, the police have different ways of helping people who are in unsafe situations and need to contact the police discreetly. Control room staff and frontline officers have been trained to recognise the signs and respond appropriately.

There has also been support for campaigns such as “Ask for Angela”, where people can ask for help at a bar by using a codeword. They can arrange to meet people away from home or send plain-clothed officers if needed.

The police try to meet the needs of the individual and respect their preferences.

- The government decided not to make misogyny a hate crime. The domestic abuse laws in this country have been updated. We have laws to deal with violence against women and girls. Do you think it would help the police to deal with these issues **if misogyny was recognised as a hate crime or treated differently?**

The Assistant Chief Constable replied that he is not against it, but he thinks that it would require a very clear definition of what constitutes misogyny, and what is just free speech or a stupid joke. Hate crime laws have changed over time, and that the police need to be careful about what they record and who they target. Police should focus on the serious cases and not waste resources on trivial matters.

Calvin Wilson - Chair of Thames Valley Police's Independent Scrutiny and Oversight Board

The role of Thames Valley Police's Independent Scrutiny and Oversight Board (ISOB) is to provide external scrutiny and accountability for the delivery of the Police's Race Action Plan. The ISOB consists of members from the communities most affected by policing issues. The ISOB aims to improve the trust and confidence of the public, especially the Black community, in the police by ensuring that they are treated fairly, respectfully, and trauma informed. Regular meetings take place of the Accountability Forum, which includes NGOs, charities, Independent Advisory Groups, Police and Crime Panels, local community groups, and members of the public.

Calvin Wilson explained that he was a barrister, a writer, and chair of the ISOB, and he has a personal and professional interest in violence against women and girls. He has written a book about domestic violence and its impact on the community. Work took place with Reid's Theatre to educate and raise awareness through theatre forum.

Changing people's attitudes will take a long time, but it is necessary to reduce violence. He wants to change the attitudes in the police and there was a need for strict and close monitoring of the police to ensure that they learn from past mistakes.

Calvin Wilson expressed his personal and professional views on the challenges of changing the behaviour and interaction of police officers and the public, especially in relation to violence against women and girls. He emphasised the need for more resources, both for the police and for the oversight board, to do their work effectively and engage with the population. He also questioned the feasibility of moving to a business-as-usual approach within three years, given the budget cuts and the national threats. He called for more dialogue with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and more robust scrutiny of the police performance.

An ISOB goal is to monitor the performance of the police closely and make sure they prevent any further incidents like this. Important issues have been raised, such as the live experiences of people and the need for trust and confidence.

The way the police interacted with the black and ethnic minority community, or the minoritised communities needed to be looked at. This community is growing in this area

across Thames Valley, and it needed to be ensured that the police have the resources to engage with them effectively.

Data analysis is an area where more expertise was needed on the Board. There needed to be people who can interpret the data from the police and present a clear view to the public. There needed to be an improvement to communication skills and more engagement with the public.

One thing that is very important for trust and confidence is the ability of the police to do their job effectively. The College of Policing has said that the law on stop and search is difficult and extensive, and the officers are not fully aware of their responsibilities or knowledge of it. This is a fundamental aspect of their work that needs to be addressed. This applies to the wider scale as well as to TVP, who need to pay attention to this issue moving forward.

TVP need to make sure they attract and retain officers who are well-equipped to do their jobs effectively. Otherwise, they will keep having problems with the community and with the public.

Young people were urged to educate themselves about the laws on stop and search and how to interact with the police. Awareness should be raised of the risks of younger people inadvertently becoming involved in bank fraud and terrorism financing, which could ruin career prospects and harm their families.

Teachers should be asked to raise awareness of these issues among their students.

Issues raised

- **In terms of the makeup of the ISOB, how are members appointed and what is the gender breakdown and intersectionality the board?**

There are four members on ISOB at the moment: two men, and two women. There was to be another person joining shortly. The membership was to increase to six or seven, depending on the budget. There was a need to have younger people on the board.

- **Violence against women and girls is a serious problem that affects people of all backgrounds and identities. What was the view of the Chair of ISOB on the issue and the actions taken by the police?**

Sympathy was expressed for victims of alleged sexual assault by a police officer, and it was hoped that victims receive justice and support. There were challenges in addressing racial discrimination and violence in the police force and the society, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. There needed to be thorough investigations and effective resolutions of these incidents.

The Chair commented that one of the problems is that the IOB, should include people from underrepresented communities, does not have enough resources to do their job properly. This sends a wrong message to everyone else.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The PCC be asked to recognise the resource issue and the structural barriers that prevent people from underrepresented communities from working effectively to address these issues with the police and other groups and look to address this.

WITNESS SESSION ON VICTIMS/ NIGHT TIME ECONOMY

- Support given to victims, work of Victims First
- Data on numbers of rapes, female genital mutilation, stalking, harassment, and digital crimes such as ‘revenge porn’, ‘up-skirting’ and on-line abuse – Support given to victims
- Domestic Abuse - <https://www.aylesburywomensaid.org.uk/> - Aylesbury Women’s Aid
- Affect on migrant women and sex workers
- Prevention of violence against women and girls in public spaces at night (Night time economy)
- Evidence suggests that women and girls who have been victims of these crimes engage in poorer health behaviours, including smoking, substance misuse and poor eating habits, and crimes such as FGM can result in long-term physical health complications – What can be done?
- Do we have support for officers to prevent victim fatigue and also to deal with the stress of working within specialist areas such as rape and sexual assault.

Witnesses: April Benson – Aylesbury Women’s Aid, Anna Kennington, Victims Delivery Officer for the OPCC Thames Valley, Vania Martins - Domestic Abuse Specialist, Oxford Against Cutting, Tina Wallace TVP, “Operation Vigilant” and Elizabeth Jones - ASBIT Manager & DA Lead at Oxford City Council.

Introduction

The Chair explained that this witness session was to hear from those frontline organisations and individuals doing work to support victims and survivors of violence against women and girls. There would also be a focus on the work carried out to protect women in the night time economy.

A background report was provided which included information on Data numbers of rapes, female genital mutilation, stalking, harassment, and digital crimes etc.

According to the [Crime Statistics](#) published by Thames Valley Police, the number of recorded offences for the following categories in the year from February 2023 to January 2024 are:

Category	Number of offences
Rape	1,281
Female genital mutilation	12
Stalking and harassment	17,988
Obscene publications and child pornography	1,057
Other sexual offences	2,956

Tina Wallace, Thames Valley Police, Detective Inspector, Covert Operations Manager/Tactical Lead “Project Vigilant”

Tina is the Tactical Lead for Project Vigilant which was piloted by Thames Valley Police (TVP) and involved a combination of increased uniformed and non-uniformed officers focused on perpetrators of VAWG in the night-time economy. The project aims were to understand, target, and disrupt predatory behaviour in public spaces and apply risk management protocols to those who have been identified through their predatory activities.

Reference was made of the need to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about sex offenders. There was the stereotype of a middle-aged man with a strange appearance, waiting in dark alleys. However, it was crucial to recognise that sex offenders come from diverse backgrounds and can be of any age, gender, or appearance.

Background to Project Vigilant

In 2019, there was a disturbing trend of increased serious sexual assaults and stranger rapes linked to the night-time economy. Over a six-month period, there was a 42% rise in serious sexual assaults and 16 stranger rapes.

Reference was made to a sexually motivated burglar who was causing concern. This elusive individual had only a vague description, and he targeted victims returning from nights out in Oxford. The route from the city centre to Cowley was a common path for these young women, most of whom were female students or young adults. They had opted not to take public transport home, choosing to walk instead.

This individual's offences escalated rapidly. Initially, he broke into properties and stole laundry. Later, he stood at the end of victims' beds, creating terror for these young women. His final offence before authorities launched an operation against him was particularly horrifying as he climbed into bed with a woman and sexually assaulted her.

This case highlights the importance of vigilance, thorough investigation, and collaboration to protect potential victims and bring offenders to justice.

Individuals were targeted who posed a potential threat, focusing on their behaviour patterns. The surveillance team and CCTV operators focused on identifying stalker-like behaviour, which conventional policing might overlook. Areas were monitored where victims were targeted, including Oxford City Centre. Behaviour which stood out as potentially predatory was flagged and uniformed intervention was used transparently to address this behaviour.

An individual was successfully apprehended who was about to approach a female and he was carrying a knife. His arrest led to further investigations involving DNA evidence and connections to other incidents.

Over an 11-week period, 41 men were encountered who were exhibiting various behaviours such as stalking and harassment of female victims. 19 of the stopped men had prior convictions related to sexual offenses, rape, or serious sexual assault.

Through intelligence and ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition), individuals were tracked down who exhibited specific patterns of behaviour as they moved between different towns and cities on Thursday, Friday, or Saturday nights.

These individuals were in positions such as bartenders, door staff, and taxi drivers, granting them easy access to vulnerable women. Information was with the NCA's Serious Crime Analysis Section, responsible for handling data related to rapes and serious sexual assaults. The NCA acknowledged the issue and recognized it as a problem.

Many women are likely to experience this type of activity in public spaces but refrain from reporting it.

Over an 11-week period, five men were arrested and there were instances of crossover offending, where individuals engaged in multiple types of criminal behaviour.

Men were found who were exhibiting predatory behaviours and some of these individuals were also carrying items that you suspect to be rape kits.

In collaboration with the National Crime Agency (NCA), a risk prioritisation matrix was developed, whereby the highest risk level (A+) included individuals with prior convictions related to sexual offences. The matrix is being academically evaluated, acknowledging that labelling every person stopped as a potential predator is not practical, but it helps maintain professional vigilance.

Examples of how this metric was used was given.

Offender types

Reference was made to studies which found the following offender types:

- Hunter:

Stays within their home area and offends within their familiar surroundings. Not always limited to sex offences also involved various criminal activities. They were confident due to familiarity with the environment.

- Poacher:

More proficient and willing to venture outside their home area as they were aware that they are well-known locally. They operated in different areas beyond their comfort zone.

- Troller:

Represents a small percentage (around 5%). They seized opportunities during normal activities. For example, they might attack perceived vulnerable individuals while walking home at night.

- Trapper:

Forms a minor portion (around 2%). Includes individuals like Wayne Couzens, a police officer. They used their position to target women with predatory behaviours are rationally chosen historically.

Data

Last year, the office for national statistics (ONS) reported there were 90,000 recorded rapes with 10% of these being stranger rapes.

According to the serious crime analysis section (SCAS), approximately 2/3 of stranger rapes begin with a simple interaction such as the offender approaching the victim, or the victim may approach the offender seeking help or directions for example. This initial interaction is a crucial phase where the offender tests the victim's vulnerability.

Research is focused on validating these behaviours related to interactions and testing phases. Reference was made to the Broken Windows Theory which emphasises positive enforcement of lesser offenses. Addressing minor issues may contribute to long-term reduction in more serious crimes in the future.

Collaboration takes place with Circle SE and this year has seen 12 men have been referred to treatment programmes, where the aim is to divert them away from harmful thoughts. Education plays a crucial role, and an example was given of Leicester City centre, where work takes place with individuals who exhibit concerning behaviours.

Civil Orders and Legal Measures were used to manage risks and there were discussions taking place to enhance and expand the Sexual Offences Act. For example, there is no specific provision for individuals carrying what appears to be a rape kit.

From the research carried out, 532 men who have been reported have been stopped; less than 10% were influenced by alcohol or drugs. Even fewer were affected by mental health or personal circumstances changes.

There was an aim to map and record all relevant data and actions. Initially, some details were unknown, but now 22 taxi drivers have been identified.

Over 300 stops involved stranger-on-stranger interactions which is concerning, as it does not involve ex-partners or known acquaintances.

Whilst domestic cases are significant, addressing stranger interactions remains a priority.

Issues Raised

- Reference was made to Wayne Couzens, a police officer, who raped and murdered Sarah Everard. He had been found to have exposed (flashed) himself a few days before he killed Sarah.

In terms of so-called **flashing or exposure offences**, how seriously are they taken by the police, particularly as they are sometimes viewed as a low level crime even by women and girls themselves?

Detective Inspector replied on work which was taking place on repeat behaviour exhibited by flashers and whether this behaviour will escalate into something else. Processes are being streamlined and joined up. Detective Superintendent John Kappes leads the RASO team, which deals with rape and serious sexual assaults.

RASO sets standards for investigation and victim support. There is recognition of the connection between exposure and sexual predatory behaviour. A dedicated Detective Inspector will oversee this work.

The focus is on profiling the risk of individuals who commit exposure or are caught for voyeurism. This profiling is linked to the sexual violence continuum.

The concept, originally developed by Liz Kelly for victims of sexual violence, could also be applied to offenders. Offenders do not always escalate to rape; they may commit lower-level offences. The goal is to build a profile against them for all their actions and manage it holistically.

Currently, it is classified as a low-level offence, however, it is recognised that this offence serves as a gateway to more serious behaviour.

- Would it be of any useful benefit for **these offences not being classified as a low-level offence?**

The response was that the issue of flashers and inappropriate behaviour is being taken seriously. There is a need to record such incidents, especially when young girls are involved. The problem extends beyond young girls; women often expect unwanted touching in public places.

Women may not report these incidents to the police due to lack of trust. Reference was made to British Transport Police who have an app where women can anonymously report behaviour they have suffered.

There was not the data available on these incidents to warrant a similar system with the police.

The Home Office has the potential to provide significant funding which would be used to fund and develop technology apps. Collaboration is essential because multiple forces are working on similar initiatives. To ensure consistency, there needed to be a single medium for recording incidents across different forces.

The OPCC has a new case management system that will be used in the Victims First Hub and by commissioned victim service providers. This new system will have an app which has the ability for Victims and professionals working around the victim (with consent of the victim) to log on and update victim and others on support being offered. There are already online crime reporting functions on the TVP website.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That Thames Valley Police develop a reporting app for victims of low-level sexual offences such as indecent exposure, cyber flashing, sexual harassment and sexual aggression by unknown offenders to provide intelligence for the police.

The ASBIT Manager & DA Lead at Oxford City Council commented that she was thrilled that the initiative started in Oxford, and her team has been part of civil orders related to it. She agreed that addressing lower-level behaviours such as stalking early can prevent more serious crimes, however, officers currently lack specific training in this area. Officers patrolling the night-time economy could benefit from training to identify and address stalking behaviour. Are there **any plans to enhance officer training** in this regard?

3,500 frontline officers were to receive training with a focus is on recognising specific behaviours and knowing how to respond effectively. The training would extend to all frontline officers and would not just focus on the night time economy.

A team of 200 officers have been trained in vigilant behaviour over the last three years and the plan is to expand this training to the entire force. The goal is to teach officers what to look for and how to respond effectively. By August, the entire frontline workforce is expected to be trained.

Research was being conducted in collaboration with Brighton University, and it was hoped to involve Durham University and Milton Keynes University. The primary goal is to understand the experiences and emotions of women who have been targeted by men, particularly at night. Even when no criminal offence has been committed against them, it is essential to explore how these women feel. By gathering this information, the aim is to build a stronger case and provide evidence related to victim experiences.

While the team is currently prioritising the study of predators or perpetrators due to limited resources, it was critical to emphasise that victims were not being ignored. Focus remained on understanding both sides of this complex issue.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That Nighttime Safety Awareness training for Victims be enhanced to schools, colleges, and universities to conduct targeted awareness sessions. Nighttime safety should be a central theme, emphasising precautions and risk reduction strategies.

Vania Martins, Domestic Abuse Specialist, Oxford Against Cutting

Oxford Against Cutting is an organisation which focuses on prevention work rather than frontline intervention. Key aspects of work includes:

- **Safeguarding Training:** Training sessions are conducted on harmful practices, particularly related to female genital mutilation (FGM) and honour-based abuse. These sessions aim to raise awareness and equip individuals with the knowledge to prevent such practices.
- **No Recourse to Public Fund¹:** Initiatives are being developed related to no recourse to public funds. This area is crucial, and your expertise from years of frontline work informs this effort.

¹ A condition attached to most temporary migrants' permission to enter or stay in the UK for the purpose of restricting access to a range of benefits which are listed as public funds for immigration purposes. Those who are unlawfully present in the UK also have no recourse to public funds.

- **Frontline Services Workshop:** The charity has created a workshop specifically for frontline service providers. This training focuses on supporting victims, especially those with no access to public funds.
- **School Engagement:** Main work involves visiting schools and engaging with students. Covering topics such as:
 - Spotting Signs: Educating students on recognising signs of harmful practices.
 - Communication Skills: Teaching them how to talk to trusted adults and support friends in need.
 - Forced Marriage and FGM: Addressing these critical issues.
- **Workshops Tailored by Age:** For primary schools, the focus is mainly on consent, with brief discussions on FGM. In secondary schools, there is a deeper delve into both FGM and forced marriage.
- **Safeguarding Training for School Staff:** Recently, a session has been conducted for school nurses in Oxfordshire, specifically addressing forced marriage.
- **Community Engagement:** Beyond schools, the organisation collaborates with community groups. Where emphasis is on education, discussing gender roles, traditions, and cultural change.

Issues Raised

- **Further details were asked about the work carried out in schools, the age range of children and whether engagement was with boys and girls?**

The Domestic Abuse Specialist reported that sessions were tailored for different age groups and demonstrated a thoughtful and impactful approach.

- Primary School Sessions (e.g., FGM):

These sessions focus on body autonomy and consent. The content is presented in a way that young children can understand. The concept of FGM is gently introduced, ensuring it remains age appropriate. There are visual aids like videos and arts which help explore the topic further. There is an emphasis on the signs and the encouragement of seeking professional advice.

- Year Seven Students (e.g., Spires Academy):

For this age group (12-13 years old), there is a delving more specifically into FGM. The topic is approached gently, providing essential information. Students are taken through visual media and discussions. Signs are highlighted and guidance is given on how to seek help.

- Consent and Relationships:

With older students (usually from year 10), misconceptions are addressed. Discussions take place on healthy relationships, emphasising that real-life connections differ from what they

might see in pornography. Consent remains a central focus, even when discussing forced marriage.

Regarding consent, the response from children depends on the age and the materials which are used because different materials are used for different ages. Reference was made to the cup of tea video which explains consent, but other videos with cartoons for younger children are also used.

An example given was parents being able to hug and kiss. They all think that parents do not need consent to hug or kiss you.

Awareness for body autonomy is raised and being conscious about personal space and consenting touch.

- **Could more be done with the police in understanding more about honour-based abuse and forced marriage** because they are complex areas? There is not high reporting rate at all and maybe that is something that could be delved into a little bit further. Student police officers receive 4 hours of training on complex issues such as HBA, FGM, and forced marriage, including cultural awareness. Was this enough?

The Domestic Abuse Specialist replied that there is some difficulties recognising honour-based abuse and forced marriage, particularly on the prevention side of things. Oxford Against Cutting work with a student population and it was important to acknowledge that people tend to target specific communities when that is not entirely accurate.

Web cafes have been organised in Urdu, Punjabi, and Bangla to ensure different communities are reached. It is important that the information is given the language which they can understand.

Regarding Student police officers only receiving four hours training, this was not enough time to understand such deep and complex issues. Cultural awareness is important, so it is important understanding cultures, communities and how forced marriage and honour-based abuse works in different cultures.

The TVP Tactical Lead Project Vigilant raised the possible use of podcasts for training which may engage officers more and the excellent work which Oxford Against Cutting and other organisations did on violence against women and girls. A library of podcasts could be built up which would provide invaluable training aids for police officers.

Prior to the finalisation of the Task and Finish Group's final report, the Head of Victim Services at the OPCC reported that there is a training post being provided as part of the Adult Service commissioned by the OPCC, starting 1st April 2024. They will be working alongside the police and other services to identify training needs, gaps and delivery methods, as well as develop and deliver training packages such as victims' awareness and crime type specific training e.g.

stalking. We will be requiring this post holder to work alongside specialist VAWG services to ensure the training packages are developed in a way that incorporates their expertise. Due to the above work, this recommendation is already in progress by the OPCC.

The Task and Finish Group felt that the use of podcasts would enable officers to use them as a training device to supplement current training provision and could be used during travel etc.

RECOMMENDATION 8: That consideration be given to using podcast-based training for police officers, working with organisations that work in the prevention of violence against women and girls.

April Benson - Aylesbury Women's Aid

Aylesbury Women's Aid is a local organisation that provides support for women, children, and young people who are, or have been, affected by domestic abuse.

The organisation provides refuge accommodation for women and families fleeing domestic violence. There are two refuges in Aylesbury that can accommodate up to 14 families. Last year, 62 women and 56 children were supported in these refuges.

Unfortunately, due to the nationwide shortage of refuge spaces, refuse space had to be refused to 196 women. 112 of these refusals were due to lack of available space, and 73 were because the families were fleeing from the Aylesbury area.

When unable to accommodate someone, the team actively seeks alternative refuge options. There is collaboration with local councils which ensures additional assistance for those in need. There is an outreach service which extends to families living in the Aylesbury Vale and the Bucks area. These families have experienced domestic violence, whether ongoing or historic.

Common issues which are dealt with include child contact, benefits, and housing assistance.

Support given to women is across a spectrum of risk levels: - Standard Risk: Handled by the outreach service, Medium and High Risk: Managed by the advice service and specialist counsellors providing counselling for domestic violence cases.

Service Statistics:

- The outreach service has 264 ongoing cases.
- 67 women received counselling.
- General Advice Calls: Over 1500 calls were received, including general advice inquiries.

Children and Young People Services:

Beyond refuge, services extend to children and young people:

- Primary School Programs (Helping Hands): Aimed at children aged 5 to 11 who have lived with domestic violence. Focusing on safety, emotions, and coping strategies.
- Secondary School Awareness Sessions: Youth workers engage with secondary school students. AWARE Program: Promotes healthy relationships. Originally for girls, now extended to young men.

Significant aspects of programmes and community engagement involve the following:

- Helping Hands Program: This was developed to promote healthy relationships among young people. It supported 141 young individuals last year and the programme addresses safety, emotions, and coping strategies.
- South Asian Community Engagement: This scheme recognised an increasing number of non-British women seeking support. Funding has been secured for a dedicated South Asian worker. Offered advice, support, and cultural understanding.
- Expanding to Eastern European Communities: This recognises the diversity within communities (e.g., Roma, Asian, African). It aims to understand specific beliefs and challenges related to violence against women.

Aylesbury Women's Aid recently won the tender for the commission of domestic violence services in Buckinghamshire. Unfortunately, the tender was based around medium and high-risk victims, so the organisation is not funded to support standard risk victims.

Group work, counselling and basic general advice and signposting to agencies are offered to standard risk victims, but it is disappointing that almost all standard risk victims of domestic violence, or those deemed to be standard risks of domestic violence are not fully supported. The organisation is restricted from providing immigration advice and in relation to referrals, immigration solicitors are necessary for such inquiries. This amounts to 3% of victims with insecure immigration status.

Alternative Support is given by approaching adult social care or children and young people's social care. The goal is to secure funding for families during the application process for the Destitute Domestic Violence (DDV) concession.

A Dedicated Worker has been allocated to handle these complex cases. The worker's multilingual abilities are crucial for navigating the diverse linguistic landscape. Interpreters are used when dealing with individuals whose first language is not English, you always use interpreters to ensure effective communication.

Reference was made to no recourse to public funds immigration, and recent legal changes legal framework addresses transnational marriage cases. Victims abroad are now included in the legal provisions.

Services are expected to support victims even when they are out of the country. Returning under the TNA (Transnational Marriage) rule is part of this support.

Issues Raised

- **Does the organisation support women who have been victims of Modern slavery?**

The organisation has supported women who have been victims of modern-day slavery. There was a good relationship with the Salvation Army. The organisation was trying to support someone who had no recourse, they did not know anything about their paperwork. Passports have been taken away from them, they have been brought into the country, with very limited English language and with a limited access to the outside world at all.

Trust must be built up a very trusting relationship with them and working alongside the fact that they do not even know who they are and what they are entitled to.

Domestic servitude is an issue as there are a lot of the women that are seen, that are treated by family members as a slave.

- If someone **self-refers and falls into the standard-risk category**, do you refer them to Victims First?

Standard risk support is currently provided by our Emotional Support Service and in the future the Adult Victim Service will support these victims.

Victims are signposted to Victims First, however, there are other organisations that support standard-risk victims but there are limitations. Rape Crisis services, now under different names, handle sexual assault cases. Domestic violence often involves sexual violence, which remains prevalent.

Unfortunately, there are funding limitations which prevent direct support for standard-risk victims. However, the organisation provides as much assistance as possible.

The organisation runs programmes such as the Freedom Program and the Power to Change Programme. These programmes focus on behaviours and safety. Unfortunately, there are funding issues which limit availability.

Anna Kennington, Victims Delivery Officer for the OPCC Thames Valley

The Victims First Hub serves as the central point for connecting victims to support services in Thames Valley. It is based in Reading, and it handles calls and referrals. Both police and partners can refer victims to the hub, and self-referrals are accepted.

After a needs assessment, the hub refers victims to specialist support services. These services include core services and grant-funded domestic abuse and sexual violence services.

In 2024, Thames Valley will transition to an automatic referral system. Victims will need to opt out if they don't want or need support. This change ensures that all victims receive an offer of support, addressing past gaps.

The rationale behind automatic referrals is rooted in ensuring equitable access to support services. The goal is to prevent anyone from being overlooked or unaware of available assistance.

Victim Services have been recently commissioned, resulting in three brand new services.

- **Adult Service (Run by Victim Support):** This service is specifically for adults who have experienced crime.
Noteworthy features:
 - **Victims Voice App:** A platform to collect victims' feedback quickly and regularly.
 - **24/7 Support Line and Live Chat:** Ensures victims can seek support beyond traditional opening hours or during peak demand.
 - **National Resilience Team:** Available to handle high demand or capacity issues.
 - **Experience with Major Incidents:** Victim Support has expertise in dealing with major incidents.
 - **National Leads on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence:** Allows learning from other PCC areas beyond Thames Valley.
- **Children and Young People Service (Run by SAFE!):** Tailored support for children and young victims.
- **Sexual Violence Service (Run by Hope After Harm):** Focused on victims of sexual violence.

There is a Young Champion Steering Group (Children and Young People) which provides opportunities for children and young people to actively participate in support services.

There are upcoming digital support offerings:

- **Tech Support Service:** Available during school holidays with extended hours.
- **Online Resources:** Including self-guided activities and video content.
- **Webinar-Style Groups and Weekly Online Drop-Ins.**
- **Live Chat for the Children and Young People's Service.**

Sexual Violence Service:

- **Support and Specialist Groupwork:** Tailored assistance for victims.

- Lived Experience Integration: Embedding real-life experiences within the service.
- Feedback Mechanisms:
 - Surveys, forums, and conversations with caseworkers.
 - Pathways for Former Service Users:
 - Paid work, volunteering, and peer mentoring roles.
 - Support for Waiting Victims: Regular check-ins during waiting periods.
 - Continuous Improvement: Soliciting client feedback for ongoing enhancements.

Issues Raised

- The Chair of the Task and Finish Group shared with the meeting, her positive experience of using the service as a victim and asked about the **waiting lists for counselling?**

The current waiting list for OPCC counselling is as follows- supportive counselling is 2 months (which is trauma-informed counselling that can assist with coping mechanisms) The Specialist Trauma Therapy support currently has a waiting list of approximately 6 months. However, the OPCC has just recruited two new Trauma Therapists and two new counsellors, so we expect the waiting list to reduce shortly.

The Victims Delivery Officer replied that waiting lists for support services can be challenging, especially for vulnerable victims who have experienced trauma.

There is work taking place on group work, where victims can benefit from peer support and shared experiences. Group settings provide a sense of community and understanding.

There are introductory chats and follow-up sessions which ensure comprehensive support.

Moving toward more group work allows services to assist a larger number of victims. Regularly starting new groups ensures ongoing availability.

Staggered group schedules aim to reduce waiting times. There are check-ins for Waiting List Individuals, and it was acknowledged the needs of those on the waiting list. Support was provided during the waiting period, and it was ensured victims are not left unsupported.

- When a victim reports a crime to the police, there is an **automatic referral process**. How does this work if this is a **high risk victim of domestic violence?**

The automatic referral of all victims of crime from TVP into the Victims First Hub will be happening later in 2024. All high risk victims are supported through the MARAC process and are not referred through to the Victims First Hub. The process for high risk victims will be remaining the same after the move to automatic referral later in 2024.

The Victims Delivery Officer replied that this was being worked on in the mobilisation period. Work was taking place with providers to determine that.

RECOMMENDATION 9: The PCC to provide the Police and Crime Panel with regular reports on the effectiveness of the automatic referral process in ensuring victims, irrespective of risk, are being offered appropriate support which includes referrals to specialist services.

RECOMMENDATION 10: Victim's First Adult Service's new provider communicates with all specialist Domestic Abuse services working with victims across Thames Valley to ensure a clear referral pathway for all risk levels.

RECOMMENDATION 11: The OPCC coordinates a working group to develop community-based interventions, for males who chose to abuse their partners and family members, which will elicit long term behavioural change.