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Wales Violence Prevention Unit:
Whole Systems Evaluation Report -
2020/21

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Wales Violence Prevention Unit: Whole Systems Evaluation Report (2020/21)

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About this report

South Wales is one of the 18 areas allocated funding by the UK Government to establish a Violence Reduction Unit. Supported by additional commitments from Welsh partners, in 2019 the Wales Violence Prevention Unit (VPU) was established. To inform the continued development of the Wales VPU, in January 2020 (and September 2020), the Public Health Institute, LJMU, were commissioned to support the development of the Wales VPU evaluation framework, and evaluate the VPU as a whole, and selected work programmes. This report forms one of a suite of outputs from this evaluation work programme, and specifically presents an evaluation of the whole system approach. All evaluation work outputs are available on the VPU website: <https://www.violencepreventionwales.co.uk/>

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Summary

In 2019, South Wales Police received funding from the Home Office to establish a violence reduction unit focused on tackling serious violence. The Wales VPU has established a delivery model that aims to develop a whole system approach to violence prevention across Wales, through the integration of four key elements: Aware, Advocate, Assist and Adopt. VPU membership comprises a range of core members, associate members, providers and commissioners to coordinate and manage a whole systems response to violence prevention. VPU members operate within one of three delivery strands:

- **Public Health** (incorporating violence surveillance, research, evaluation, shared learning and knowledge, and advocacy for a public health approach to violence prevention);
- **Partnerships** (incorporating partnerships for prevention, commissioning interventions, ensuring that violence prevention is included in all policies, and referral/ support pathways and multi-agency collaborative working);
- **Operations** (incorporating tactical and operational leadership, policing and criminal justice partners and operational data and intelligence sharing).

A Whole Systems Approach to Violence Prevention

The VPU implemented a place-based approach to address the root causes of violence; this approach acknowledges the influence of the wider determinants of health across the life-course and provides a framework to address the levels of need for communities across populations. Mobilising change across the whole system is an effective way to tackle complex public health issues, resulting in coordinated and collaborative approaches to bring about sustained positive change. Evidence about the most effective way to implement a whole systems approach is mixed, largely due to complexities across systems and inconsistencies in the frameworks used to apply these. Evidence has identified ten key features of a systems approach to tackle public health problems, which highlights the importance of developing relationships, engaging stakeholders, ensuring supportive leadership and having a robust and sustainable approach. This framework has been used to assess the VPU progress towards a whole system approach, and identify gaps and recommendations.

Evaluation

The Public Health Institute (PHI), LJMU, was commissioned to carry out an evaluation of the Wales VPU whole system public health approach to preventing violence (across 2020/21). The evaluation was designed to build upon the Year 1 evaluation that focused on the operational aspects of the VPU during 2019/20¹.

Main Evaluation Aims

1. Examine the whole system approach to the Wales VPU work programme development and implementation since 2019/20;
2. Evaluate the development, implementation and outcomes of the Wales Violence Surveillance Analysis System (WVSAS);
3. Establish and embed routine monitoring and evaluation systems, to inform short, medium and long-term monitoring and evaluation of the VPU and related work programmes (resulting in the development and publication of a Violence Prevention Evaluation Toolkit [VPET]).

¹ Timpson H, Harrison R, Bigland C, Butler N, Quigg Z. (2020). Evaluation of the Violence Prevention Unit. Year 1 Findings (2019/20). Public Health Institute, Liverpool John Moores University.

The methodology incorporated four systems evaluation approaches that are advocated within the literature, including: **in-depth research with a systems lens** (sampling participants from different parts of the system, exploring the impact of the VPU on relationships and change, and how different parts of the system affect one another); **adaptation of traditional evaluation approaches with a systems perspective** (exploring facilitators to behaviour change, barriers, and challenges, and gathering evidence about what works well, for whom and under what circumstances); **concept and system mapping** (understanding problems, challenges and solutions through stakeholder engagement); and **network analysis** (stakeholder engagement to map how different people or organisations connect to one another to identify key influencers/silo working within the Wales VPU network). Evaluation methods included:



Interviews with VPU partners and other key stakeholders

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants representing a range of core (full-time) members, associate members and wider partners across 21 organisations.



Evaluation of the Wales Violence Surveillance and Analysis System (WVSAS) (full report available separately)

An online survey (n=50) was implemented to explore VPU partner's awareness, perceptions and use of the WVSAS (including the COVID-19 violence monitoring reports).



Stakeholder engagement workshops

Feedback and learning was captured from two stakeholder events facilitated by the PHI evaluation team. One workshop presented the VPET to key partners (n=27) involved in delivering and/or providing local violence prevention interventions, providing an introduction to the toolkit and supporting partners to develop evaluation objectives and an evaluation plan for their intervention. A second workshop was held with partners (n=34) to explore and identify VPU outcomes, explore views and experiences of systems change and identify mechanisms of change.



Review of programme delivery documentation

Documents relating to the strategic direction and delivery of the Wales VPU were reviewed.

Findings and recommendations

The VPU is influencing sustainable change by embedding a public health approach to violence prevention across the system that goes beyond the sharing of best practice or disseminating best-evidence. The VPU has invested resource and expertise into establishing effective partnerships and networks across a range of relevant agencies. The VPU has resulted in less silo working, better communication between partners and less duplication of effort. The direction of travel for the VPU in terms of longer-term impacts and associated social value of violence prevention activities are evident. Findings are mapped against the key principles of a whole systems approach to tackle public health problems to assess VPU progress towards a whole system approach, and identify gaps and recommendations:

Identifying a system: Stakeholder involvement with the VPU is part of a wider system that embeds a public health approach to violence prevention. Findings reflected stakeholder knowledge and experiences of the system in South Wales, rather than an all Wales footprint. Competing for funding with other organisations was highlighted as a challenge,

"I think we've already made significant change on system change...I think we've already managed to make really big strides in that area".

alongside concerns about sustainability and the importance of securing future funding, which could hinder their full engagement.

Recommendation: Encourage collaborative bid writing to reduce feelings of competition between voluntary and community organisations.

Capacity building: The VPU model has built awareness of public health approaches to violence prevention in Wales and supported organisations to adopt this approach.

“As far as knowledge of the unit has grown, is that we've been able to bring capability and capacity to other areas of work that helped prevent violence”

Recommendation: Build on existing capacity by supporting partners to understand local areas and the importance, for example, of cultural identities and associated vulnerabilities of young people who are offending.

Creativity and innovation: The VPU works creatively and innovatively with partners to develop and implement initiatives to prevent violence. Although the VPU facilitates networks and partnerships with communities, limited evidence was available about mechanisms to support creative or innovative approaches to address issues at local levels.

“One of the things that was very, very different was we had a table-top exercise as a team on how would we respond if there's a big increase in knife crime... it was really good, because a lot of providers in particular didn't know what each other did in detail”

Recommendation: Develop a place-led approach by enhancing engagement with communities (including community groups, children, young people and families) to identify opportunities to personalise services within hotspot areas. Focus on developing and implementing novel approaches that align with the needs and assets within communities.

Relationships The VPU has been proactive in supporting the development of effective relationships across a range of multi-agency partners. Members who did not have working relationships with core members prior to the VPU were less likely to have a full understanding of the VPU model and approach. Stakeholders identified gaps and suggested agencies that could be included as associate members or identified VPU partners.

“In our experience, rarely are organisations brought together, particularly in terms of meetings pulled together by the police, brought together a range of partnership, and the focus on the community and community, voluntary sector, community champions as well”

Recommendations: Review and define VPU membership. Include representation from broader agencies and ensure each core and associate member has a defined role in terms of their responsibility within the VPU.

Engagement Pockets of good practice were highlighted in relation to community engagement. There was limited evidence about the ways in which people, organisations and sectors are engaging community members in programme development and delivery.

Moving beyond a 'place-based approach' to a 'place-led approach'

Recommendations: Work with local communities to co-produce violence prevention interventions, moving away from a 'top-down' approach to engage more collaboratively with local community groups and those working at grassroots level, including young people and families affected by violence and/or at risk of violence, victims and survivors, and perpetrators.

Communication The VPU supports communication between sectors and organisations within the system. Most VPU members were aware of the overarching ambitions of the unit and their role and responsibilities within this. Longer-term ambitions of the VPU were less clear.

"I don't think there's any lack of communication"

Recommendations: Continue to deliver webinars and use these as a vehicle to communicate VPU delivery, research and evaluation activity, outcomes and plans to partners.

Embedded action and policies The VPU has enabled members to embed a public health approach to violence prevention across their organisations. Many agreed that this is an evolving process that will strengthen and grow as the VPU becomes more established.

"This is where I want to really go where we're much more influential on Welsh Government policy, spending priorities... genuinely affecting big decisions"

Recommendations: Develop a clear plan for the immediate and longer-term strategic direction of the VPU and communicate this with all partners across the system and across Wales. Ensure that the operational aspect of the VPU is clearly defined, highlighting the specific deliverables and functions of the VPU.

Robust and sustainable Stakeholders described their ambitions to support the VPU to become a sustainable entity. Although many described the challenges associated with short-term funding, many acknowledged their role and responsibility in ensuring that a public health approach to violence prevention becomes embedded across the whole system.

"The fact that the VPU might not be here in 14-months' time is a little bit of a worry for business continuity"

Recommendation: Support collaborative working across the system (e.g. opportunities for joint-funding) to reduce competitiveness between agencies and improve sustainability.

Facilitative leadership The VPU has provided strong leadership and strategic support, resulting in the development and implementation of violence prevention activity that is starting to create change across the whole system. Whilst VPU leadership is strong, the evidence from this evaluation showed that stakeholders tended to focus on the 'top-down' aspects of VPU leadership.

"This is not us empire building, it starts with that focus on a mission of preventing violence"

Recommendations: Build on community engagement initiatives to focus on working at grassroots level to co-produce violence prevention interventions. Provide opportunities for 'lay-members' to represent the voice of the community and influence the strategic and operational direction of the VPU.

Monitoring and evaluation The VPU are committed to ensuring that violence surveillance, research and evaluation underpins all activity. The VPU have invested a resource and capacity into developing and disseminating evidence and are committed to embedding evidence-based practice into violence prevention initiatives.

"We have a lot of skills within our team to do that, but we have a lot more influence locally because we're able to inform what's happening on the ground"

Recommendations: Continue to measure outcomes to ensure that the VPU can evidence the direction of travel and the longer-term impacts associated with the overarching aims and objectives of the VPU. Reflect on how these align with the Key Performance Indicators set out by the Home Office. Continue to embed evaluation across VPU activity and explore if/how the VPET has been adopted and implemented across partner organisations.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Wales Violence Prevention Unit (VPU)²

In 2019, South Wales Police received funding from the Home Office to establish a violence reduction unit focused on tackling serious violence. Supported by commitments from wider Welsh partners, the Wales VPU was established. Although funded interventions are delivered in South Wales, the scope and operation of the VPU is Wales-wide, informed by the need to engage with partners, share evidence and learning, and facilitate a whole systems response to violence prevention. The VPU is committed to taking a public health approach to preventing violence, and through this approach, aims to develop a **whole system approach to violence prevention**. The VPU seeks to ensure this public health approach through four key elements:

Aware: build awareness of public health approaches to violence prevention in Wales and act as a hub of expertise on violence prevention. This includes developing and disseminating knowledge of the evidence-base, theory, subject expertise, and local/national/ international best practice.

Advocate: for a public health approach to violence prevention, through VPU leadership on violence and vulnerability across Wales, and establishing violence prevention networks.

Assist: partners to use evidence to inform service delivery and enable multi-agency joint working in tackling violence in Wales, producing data analysis, convening partners and providing technical advice and support.

Adopt: commission and fund interventions that prevent all forms of violence across Wales through a public health approach, by mobilising services, delivering interventions and conducting research and evaluation to assess practice.

VPU membership comprises a range of associate members, which includes representation from Welsh Government, Home Office Immigration, the voluntary sector, health and social care and education (see figure 1). The membership model ensures that the VPU can coordinate and manage a whole systems response to violence prevention, identifying opportunities for collaboration and shared learning.

The VPU has adopted a three-strand delivery approach that further works to ensure that a public health approach is translated into operational practice. Each VPU member operates primarily within one of these three strands:

Public Health: incorporating violence surveillance, research, evaluation, shared learning and knowledge, and advocacy for a public health approach to violence prevention.

Partnerships: incorporating partnerships for prevention, commissioning for prevention, ensuring that violence prevention is included in all policies, and pathways and multi-agency working.

Operations: incorporating tactical and operational leadership, policing and criminal justice partners and operational data and intelligence sharing.

² A detailed description of the Wales VPU model is provided with their 2020/21 Annual Report.

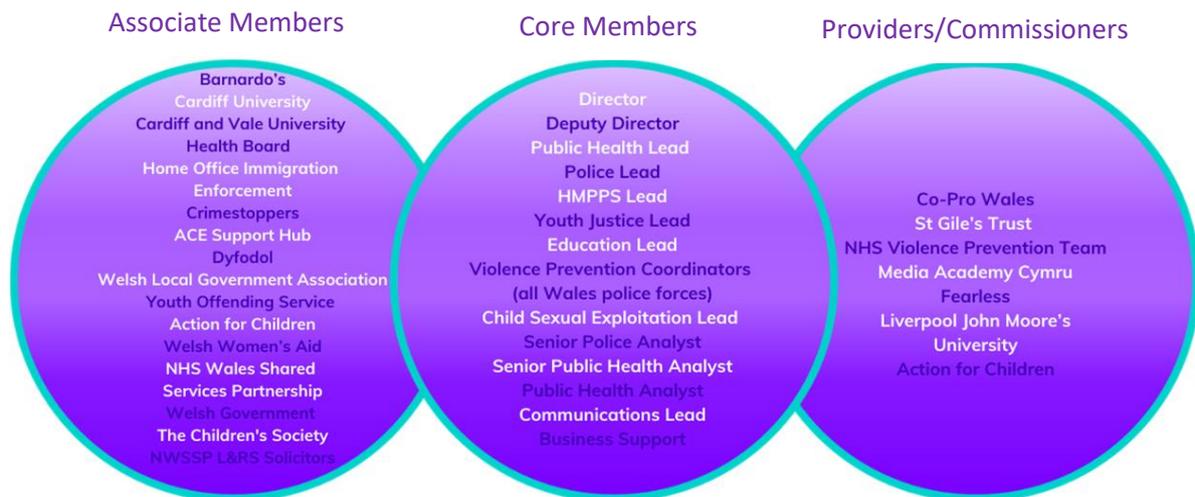


Figure 1. Wales VPU Membership Model

Towards the end of the 2019/20 financial year, the VPU developed a comprehensive theory of change and logic model to facilitate an understanding of the activities and interventions required to achieve violence prevention in Wales. Further, the VPU recognised the need to influence wider, sustainable change by influencing key agencies/stakeholders to incorporate public health approaches into their work, improve inter-agency responses and embed system level change.

1.2 A whole systems approach to violence prevention

Interventions that focus on individuals alone will not address the determinants of violence. Identifying and understanding the wider determinants of health that affect a population is essential (PHE, 2019; NHS 2019). Place-based approaches (as described in Box 1) acknowledge the influence of the wider determinants of health across the life-course and provide a framework to address the levels of need for communities across populations (PHE, 2019).

The Serious Violence Strategy (Home Office, 2018) highlights the importance of implementing a place-based approach in addressing the root causes of violence. Joint working is a key feature of a place-based approach, requiring effective engagement, planning and partnerships between statutory, non-statutory and community sectors. Effective systems leadership must be in place in order to plan and implement effective interventions that result in equitable outcomes (PHE, 2019).

In recent years, the principles of systems science have been applied to a range of complex health, social and environmental topics and advocated in national and international policy and guidance (Kleinert & Horton, 2015; Mabry & Bures, 2014; Rutter,

Box 1: A place-based approach

Every Violence Reduction Unit is based within a different locality, with differing needs and priorities for diverse populations. A place-based approach recognises that a one-size fits all approach to tackling serious violence will not be successful. A place-based approach involves organisations working in partnership to focus on improving outcomes for the 'whole place', not just individuals. This approach is intended to reduce silo working. Each area needs to define their place; this is both a physical setting and social context. For a place-based approach to be meaningful, the 'place' must be defined by local partners, including members of the community (PHE 2019, page 20).

2011). It is recognised that a whole systems approach is required to tackle complex public health issues, in order to support a coordinated and collaborative approach to bring about long-term change. Bagnall, Radley, Jones et al (2019) highlight how implementing a programme of activities across multiple settings or levels does not constitute a systems approach; it is the context in which the interventions are introduced and the central operational mechanisms that are important. A number of evidence reviews have explored the key concepts of a whole systems public health approach, with a number of NICE reviews³ informing the development of guidance which identifies ten key features of a whole system approach. Whilst the reviews were initially commissioned to focus on obesity, the scope of the work was broadened to focus on whole community approaches (Bagnall et al, 2019; Garside, et al, 2010; NICE, 2010).

Table 1: Ten features of a systems approach to tackle public health problems (Garside et al, 2010; NICE, 2010, published in Bagnall et al 2019)

Identifying a system	Explicit recognition of the public health system with the interacting, self-regulating and evolving elements of a complex adaptive system. Recognition given that a wide range of bodies with no overt interest or objectives referring to public health may have a role in the system and therefore that the boundaries of the system may be broad.
Capacity building	An explicit goal to support communities and organisations within the system.
Creativity and innovation	Mechanisms to support and encourage local creativity and/ or innovation to address public health and social problems.
Relationships	Methods of working and specific activities to develop and maintain effective relationships within and between organisations.
Engagement	Clear methods to enhance the ability of people, organisations and sectors to engage community members in programme development and delivery.
Communication	Mechanisms to support communication between actors and organisations within the system.
Embedded action and policies	Practices explicitly set out for public health and social improvement within organisations within the system.
Robust and sustainable	Clear strategies to resource existing and new projects and staff.
Facilitative leadership	Strong strategic support and appropriate resourcing developed at all levels.
Monitoring and evaluation	Well-articulated methods to provide ongoing feedback into the system, to drive change to enhance effectiveness and acceptability.

Despite the importance of a whole systems approach being advocated in current public health policy, evidence regarding the most impactful ways to apply this approach is currently mixed. Bagnall et al (2019) explored published evidence on the application of a whole systems approach on public health and related areas (including crime and justice), with reference to the ten key features developed by Garside, et al, 2010 & NICE, 2010. The study concluded that programmes that adopt these ten features

³ Garside, Pearson, Hunt, Moxham & Anderson (2010); Hunt, Anderson, Coelho et al (2011); Pearson, Garson, Fry-Smith & Bayliss (2011).

are more likely to be successful than programmes that do not. The importance of developing relationships, engaging stakeholders, ensuring supportive leadership and having a robust and sustainable approach were all highlighted as being key to success. The importance of community capacity, ownership and commitment, and time to build relationships and trust were also identified as central to a successful whole system approach (Bagnall et al 2019).

1.3 Wales Violence Prevention Unit evaluation: phase 2

In 2019/20, LJMU evaluated the process and implementation of the Wales VPU across its first year of operation (Timpson, Harrison, Bigland, Butler & Quigg 2020). This current evaluation builds upon the first phase, with the aim of building upon the evidence by exploring the process and impacts of the VPU, with a specific focus on the **whole system public health approach to preventing violence**.

The primary objectives of the current evaluation were to:

1. Examine the **whole system approach** to the Wales VPU work programme development and implementation since 2019/20, using the VPU's logic model as a framework to assess progress in meeting identified activities and outcomes.
2. Evaluate the development, implementation and outcomes of the **Wales Violence Surveillance Analysis System (WVSAS)**.
3. Identify **how COVID-19 has impacted upon the VPU**, considering the whole system, WVSAS and funded interventions, and progress in activities and outcomes.

In addition, the evaluation also sought to:

4. Collaborate with Wales VPU to establish and embed routine monitoring and evaluation systems, to inform short, medium and long-term monitoring and evaluation of the VPU and related work programmes (resulting in the development and publication of a Violence Prevention Evaluation Toolkit [VPET]).
5. Collaborate with the Wales VPU to support local violence prevention interventions to implement programme monitoring and evaluation processes, thus empowering partners to conduct robust evaluation of violence prevention interventions using the VPET.

This report focuses on the methods, findings and recommendations from the whole system evaluation, and draws on the process and outcomes of the WVSAS evaluation (Quigg, Butler, Harrison, Bates & Timpson 2021) and the development and implementation of the VPET (Quigg, Timpson, Newbury et al 2020); these aspects of the evaluation are reported separately.

Evaluation data collection commenced in autumn 2020 and was completed in March 2021. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the LJMU Research Ethics Committee.

2. Methodology

This programme of research used a mixed-methods approach to gather the evidence required to achieve the evaluation objectives. Given the predominant focus of the evaluation, the overarching methodology used a systems approach, drawing on *Guidance on Systems Approaches to Local Public Health Evaluation* published by Egan, McGill, Er et al (2019a) and Egan, McGill, Penney et al (2019b). This approach allowed exploration of the impact of the VPU, whilst gathering evidence about the wider factors that influence change.

There are few studies that provide evidence regarding the implementation and effectiveness of a whole system approach; largely due to evaluations not focusing on exploring the 'central underlying

operational mechanisms' that are crucial to a whole systems approach, such as improving networks and relationships, and working towards a common goal (Bagnall et al, 2019).

In light of the available evidence, and guided by available recommendations, our methodology incorporated four of the systems evaluation approaches summarised by Egan et al (2019a):

- **In-depth research with a systems lens:** We sampled participants from different parts of the system, exploring the impact of the VPU on relationships and change, and understanding how different parts of the system affect one another.
- **Adaptation of traditional evaluation approaches with a systems perspective:** We explored facilitators to behaviour change, barriers, and challenges, and started to gather evidence about what works well, for whom and under what circumstances.
- **Concept and system mapping:** We sought to understand problems, challenges and solutions through stakeholder engagement. We explored the broader factors that influence violence prevention activities in Wales and discussed opportunities for change.
- **Network analysis:** Through stakeholder engagement, we carried out work to map how different people or organisations connect to one another to identify key influencers within the Wales VPU network (organisations who have more influence than others do) and explored whether some parts of the network were isolated or working in silo.

Other systems evaluation methods identified by Egan et al (2019b) include **systems dynamic modelling** (computational modelling that examines how complex changes affect the wider system) and **agent based modelling** (computational modelling that examines the actions and interactions of people within a larger group); both methods were outside of the scope of the current evaluation.

A note on evidencing outcomes:

Whilst measuring outcomes is an important aspect of evaluation, a systems thinking approach acknowledges that evaluations will consider the **changes** that occur because of a programme or intervention, and the impacts (or potential impacts) that these changes could bring about over time. Here, a systems evaluation enables exploration of the mechanisms that underpin violence prevention interventions and provides *"an indication of the 'direction of travel' (the trend in benefits or harms across impacts at specific time-points) rather than a final verdict about an intervention's effects."* (Egan et al 2019a, p.12).

2.1 Evaluation Methods

A number of methods were implemented to gather evidence for this evaluation:



Interviews with VPU partners and other key stakeholders

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants representing a range of core (full-time) members, associate members and wider partners across 21 organisations.

- Interviews explored participant's role and involvement with the VPU; if and how this has developed over time; their views on the VPU's role regarding broader violence prevention activity across Wales; views regarding the future direction of the VPU and related work programmes (including sustainability) and barriers and facilitators to success.

Interviews were carried out over the telephone or via MS Teams (depending on participant preference). Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed using transcribing software (Otter) and verified by the researcher.



Evaluation of the Wales Violence Surveillance and Analysis System (WVSAS) (Quigg et al 2021; full report available separately)

An online survey (n=50) was implemented to explore VPU partner's awareness, perceptions and use of the WVSAS (including the COVID-19 violence monitoring reports), including the data available and analyses/outputs produced. The survey was open to current and potential users of the WVSAS and aimed to identify:

- Which partners currently use the system, how, why and the impacts for local partners and communities.
- The acceptability and utility of the current WVSAS, areas of good practice and areas for development considering the data available, analyses/outputs produced, and data/outputs sharing pathways.
- The data needs of partners to support them to implement a public health approach to violence prevention.
- What data organisation's may contribute to the WVSAS (considering the VPU logic model), and the potential for inclusion of such data in the WVSAS, considering barriers and facilitators.
- Partner experiences and perceptions of the VPU in a broader sense, including understandings of the aims and objectives of the VPU, the ways in which it supports partnership and whole system working, and engagement with wider stakeholders and beneficiaries.

A link to the online survey and accompanying participant information sheet was distributed by the VPU via email and social media to VPU partners and groups who currently access the WVSAS data and reports. Partners who have used the WVSAS were asked if they could be contacted for further details. An additional seven interviews were conducted with key partners to further explore issues specific to the WVSAS.



Stakeholder engagement workshops

Two stakeholder engagement workshops were held during phase 2 of this evaluation. The first was held in November 2020, to present the VPET to key partners involved in delivering and/or providing local violence prevention interventions. The workshop provided an introduction to the VPET and worked with partners to support them to develop evaluation objectives and an evaluation plan for their intervention. The workshop was attended by 27 people representing 15 organisations; the majority of which being community and/or voluntary sector organisations.

A second stakeholder engagement workshop was held in March 2021 to explore and identify VPU outcomes, explore views and experiences of systems change and identify mechanisms of change. The workshop provided the opportunity for stakeholders to reflect on the logic model and theory of change that was developed in 2020, and map expected short, medium and longer-term outcomes.

The workshop was attended by 34 stakeholders representing the core (full-time) members, associate members and wider partners across 16 organisations. The workshop explored stakeholder's experiences of the extent to which multiagency working happens, exploring relationships across the system and whether wider partnerships, systems and pathways have been strengthened since the VPU was formed. The workshop also explored the broader factors that influence violence prevention activities in Wales and present opportunities for change, and to understand the problems, challenges and solutions.



Review of programme delivery documentation

Documents relating to the strategic direction and delivery of the Wales VPU were reviewed. These included the South Wales Serious Youth Violence Strategic Needs Assessment (2020), the Serious Youth Violence in South Wales Prevention Strategy (2020) and the Wales VPU Annual Report (2021). The Annual Report provides an overview of the progress and outcomes of the Wales VPU and has provided the context for current progress and performance.

Identifying the impact of COVID-19:

Questions regarding the impact of COVID-19 were incorporated into the interviews, stakeholder engagement workshop and the WVSAS activities.

Social value:

The evaluation methods included questions regarding the wider (and often unintended) social, economic and environmental outcomes of the VPU work programme, to help explain and understand the change brought about by the programme. This included questions about the beneficiaries of the VPU outcomes across the system (such as individuals, communities and partner organisations) and the growth and sustainability of violence prevention activities (including the VPU). This approach also helps us to identify harder to measure outcomes and impacts such as wider social benefits, reduced use/engagement with services, and increased awareness and use of community assets.

2.2 Analysis and Reporting

This report provides a detailed overview of the methods, findings and recommendations from the whole system evaluation. The WVSAS evaluation and development and implementation of the VPET are described separately (Quigg et al 2020). The process and findings from these activities are incorporated into this report where appropriate.

Qualitative data from the stakeholder interviews and the second stakeholder workshop were analysed using an inductive thematic approach. Key themes and sub-themes were developed and are presented within the results section.

These findings have been triangulated with reference to the key principles of a whole system public health approach set out by NICE (2010) and further recommendations identified by Bagnall et al (2019).

Identifying a system	Communication
Capacity building	Embedded action and policies
Creativity and innovation	Robust and sustainable
Relationships and trust	Facilitative leadership
Engagement	Monitoring and evaluation

Finally, a systems map has been developed, informed by all the evidence gathered from this evaluation. The systems map provides an overview of how the different agents (people, services, organisations) interconnect and influence each other.

3. Findings

For the purposes of this evaluation, the term 'system' refers to the wide range of agencies across Wales who contribute to violence prevention. As acknowledged by Garside et al (2010) and NICE (2010), the boundaries for this system are broad and undefined.

We know from the evidence that successful systems change goes beyond commissioning interventions at different levels of the system (primary/secondary/tertiary); it also depends upon the partnerships involved in adopting a public health approach to violence prevention, and successfully embedding this across policy and practice. The three-strand delivery approach of the VPU works to deliver this ambition through a focus on public health, partnerships and operational practice. Findings from this whole system evaluation focused on the growth of partnerships and networks, the impact of this, and gaps or weaknesses across the system. Many stakeholders were able to articulate the mission of the VPU and their conversations focused on their experiences and perceptions of systems change, as well as their knowledge of commissioned interventions, though there were gaps. A number of themes and sub-themes have been identified and are presented below, with quotes to illustrate key points. Where relevant, the perceptions and experiences of core members and associate members are presented separately e.g. to highlight differences or reiterate a finding (associate members are labelled 'AM').

3.1 Partnerships: Developing Systems Change

People and Networks

Throughout all of the interviews, core and associate members described people and networks as being central to the success of the VPU, in being able to embed a public health approach to violence prevention, and ultimately to have an impact on preventing serious violence. Many reflected on how VPU membership has grown since the first year and the majority described that the VPU were engaging with all relevant partners. This was reflected in the WVSAS evaluation, finding that a large proportion of the respondents (79.1%, n=34/43) agreed that the VPU is engaging with all relevant partners. Within the whole system evaluation, core members described how existing knowledge of key people working in violence prevention and/or public health informed the identification of associate members, with mapping then used to identify gaps. The majority of associate members echoed this, describing their pre-existing relationships with key VPU personnel and explaining how this awareness helped developed shared understandings of who should be involved in the VPU network.

Those opportunities for joint working or bringing in some of the associate members in to do kind of work with the VPU, that's been strengthened over the year as well, just as we've become a bit more established, so people have kind of become a bit more aware of the support that we can offer, and the capabilities within the team. (Core, P3)

We had actually looked at a couple of pieces of work working together with South Wales, so I already knew him on his retirement from former Assistant Chief Constable, and we knew that he was going into this role and I actually met with them very early on, I think when he was meeting and greeting as many people as possible to discuss how we could continue to work together. He obviously explained the general structure of, you know, the VPU, as it was developing and establishing in Wales, and that there would be an invitation for me to join as an associate member. (AM, P7)

The history behind the partnerships really kind of helps, particularly in the field of kind of policing and public health. And it's really brilliant (Core, P19)

The associate members described their experiences of working with partners across the system and shared their views on how involvement with the VPU had expanded their networks and/or encouraged partnership working. There was a consensus amongst all the stakeholders that this level of partnership and networking would not have been achieved without the VPU.

Certainly, from seeing the list of attendees on meetings, of public services and charities and all sorts of members, you know, so that every man who is involved in this sector seems to have been brought into the VPU. (AM, P21)

I've seen that in our experience, rarely are organisations brought together, particularly in terms of meetings pulled together by the police, that brought together a range of partnership, and the focus on the community, voluntary sector, community champions as well.... I'd be crediting the VPU, because they're [otherwise] kind of disparate really in terms of agencies and so on, they're not very strongly working together in that regard. (AM, P20)

It's almost like joining together and working together as a whole. So you've got that sort of single approach to dealing with violence... I think every agency is doing that feeds into the VPU, then then you're going to get the picture, which you might not otherwise get. (AM, P4)

There's definitely a need for it [the VPU] brings partners together, and gets us to kind of communicate with people that, you know, sometimes we wouldn't necessarily communicate with unless there's a statutory duty, really, if there was a child involved. (AM, P18)

These findings were echoed within the WVSAS evaluation, with 83% (n=39/47) of survey respondents agreeing that the VPU is facilitating multi-agency working for the purposes of violence prevention across Wales (e.g. co-ordinating partner responses to violence, enabling networking between organisations across Wales). The growing VPU membership was discussed in a number of the whole system interviews, with partners describing how people and organisations working in the field of violence prevention had actively started to seek to engage with the VPU. Core members described how they had taken a more selective and strategic approach to associate membership in recent times. The majority of partners agreed that the membership had been well managed.

I work with strategic partners and local partners to deliver initiatives around violence prevention and the prevention of SOC (Serious Organised Crime) and importantly, promote that SOC often leads to violence, whether it's county lines and acquisitive types of crime....I just I made the strategy happen to link in with a VPU to try and adopt and be part of that network ...we're an associate member of the VPU. (AM, P22)

As the membership was ever growing, I felt they had a very informed way of ensuring that they're making the best of what they can do in terms of the situation. So I found that they just did their research, the meetings were well attended as they had clear principles and objectives.... The actual operation of the of the VPU themselves, colleagues, I was very impressed...a great bunch of people very determined, meetings were always very well attended, as I said, they were very clear what they wanted to achieve. And they were constantly visiting that each meeting, what is it we're trying to achieve and how we're going to get there? I think they work well as a team. And like I say, the meetings were always increasing in the membership, which just shows that they're reaching down getting the right people involved around the table. (AM, P12)

However, whilst many associate members were aware of the VPU, a small number described not having much knowledge about the unit prior to being approached. Another associate member described not being clear about the activities that are funded through the VPU or the process through which this funding is decided upon. This highlights that communication about the VPU may not reach agencies working on the periphery.

The Deputy Director at the time, suggested that we should be involved in violence prevention. And they wanted me to do a project, to join as an Associate Member... I did a little bit of research into the Violence Prevention Unit. So prior to that, I wasn't fully aware around that. So I did some research. (AM, P4)

Challenges for Partners

Although partnership working had been facilitated and strengthened as a result of the VPU, some partners described challenges associated with this. During the stakeholder engagement workshop, some partners described that organisations within the third sector often bid for the same pots of funding, and that this can create competition and challenge amongst agencies who should focus on working together. It was also felt that organisations often had competing priorities and that this could create a challenge in terms of adopting a collaborative approach. Specific examples provided on virtual post-it notes included:

- Organisations who have competing priorities – violence is one of many issues they have to address;
- Organisations/services competing with each other – rather than working together. At times, third sector/voluntary organisations compete, particularly when they are dependent on funding;
- Conflict in relationships amongst certain organisations – e.g. those who 'compete' for the same funding can impact on willingness to collaborate;
- Transparency and joint working collectively;
- Partnership buy in, not only in voice but also in action. Resource is often a barrier to that;
- Valuing the work of all teams. We have a tendency to think that some are unimportant, while OUR method or way is best.

Violence Prevention and Public Health

A key ambition of the Wales VPU is to embed a public health approach to violence prevention across the system, using members and wider partners across relevant networks to deliver the four elements of the VPU model (Aware, Advocate, Assist, Adopt). The majority of stakeholders were confident in their understanding of a public health approach to violence prevention, with many describing examples of how and where this approach was being implemented across the system. This finding was echoed within the WVSAS evaluation, which found that 87.8% (n=43/49) of survey participants agreed (including strongly agree and agree) that they understood the role and aims and objectives of the Wales VPU; 73.5% (n=36/49) had a good awareness of the activities/work being delivered by the VPU; and, 87.5% (n=42/48) agreed the VPU is proactively promoting a public health approach to violence prevention.

During stakeholder interviews for the whole system evaluation, many of the core members gave examples of how the VPU were advocating and implementing this approach, talking specifically about how they had then been able to adopt this approach within their own role. Some also spoke of their

perceptions as to how this approach was being embedded across the wider system. Many highlighted how the activities implemented prior to the VPU has provided a good foundation for the programme.

I think there's a pretty good base level, in terms of some aspects of it, you know, the ACEs programme in Wales, and in Early Action Together, so I think that provided some ground into, you know, for people, certainly in policing. (Core, P15)

There's been this embedding of Adverse Childhood Experiences Early Action Together programme, and that's been around for years, you know, it's not new, it's not something brand new. So I think in fairness that programme, as well as being very explicit that was part of that endeavour around Early Action Together, you know, protecting future generations. And consequently, I think the environment that we've entered has been a very welcoming one in terms of taking an early intervention preventative approach, to be honest, I think everyone here believes in it believes in prevention. (Core, P1)

A key aspect of this evaluation was to explore how partnerships and networks had evolved throughout the second year of the VPU, and to evidence the impact this had on the wider system. Many core members described how a public health approach was becoming embedded across roles and organisations, and how the VPU was taking a more strategic approach to tackling the root causes of violence.

If you are taking a public health approach, then you can't just look at that type of violence in isolation. We all know they're so incredibly linked...if you want to tackle the root cause of violence, then you need to be going much earlier and deeper, and so, so in terms of the target groups, I think a lot of the programmes that we commissioned, have been very targeted at those groups, but I would say, I think they've definitely broadened over the past year or so. (Core, P19)

We've introduced a Serious Violence Prevention Champions Network within South Wales Police. So that's led by the VPU, and I think we've recruited 52 officers now to the network. We deliver a range of webinars, and they've got an online forum. All of that is around being trauma informed and aware, a public health approach, and just trying to help them kind of embed that into their everyday operational work. And then within the unit itself, as well, that's certainly developed over the last year or so, people come from all different types of organisations, some are very much kind of on this public health, trauma informed approach. (Core, P3)

Associate members attend VPU team meetings and share their experiences, ensuring that good practice is adopted and that duplication is avoided. One core member described the importance of the associate members, highlighting how they are “an ambassador for violence prevention” and are better informed by being part of the community. Associate members described their experiences of working alongside the VPU to establish and embed a public health approach to violence prevention. Many described their perceptions of how well this approach was understood by stakeholders, and how well this approach had been embedded across the system. Whilst all associate members were able to talk positively about the importance of embedding a public health approach to violence prevention, their experiences of implementing/advocating this differed depending on their level of awareness of the VPU.

When we see all the associate members that are in the table, I think there's probably 30 or 40 of us in our monthly meeting. Everyone now has a good understanding of the benefits of a public health approach. (AM, P22)

Across all the agencies that I've worked with, either directly or indirectly over the last few years, I would definitely say the information and guidance around ACE and a public health approach would be massively increased... I think there's a change on focus on looking at what causes the violence, okay, is this a drink or drug problem... But then, when you look at it from a public health approach, you got to go deeper than that, you've got to look at it as a disease...it's about looking at the bigger picture, and we're going at the root of the problem. (AM, P5)

It was about having that third sector influence as well. Supporting with anything that was going on from a promotional element or anything that we could help to shape to develop some understanding, bringing in our knowledge of working with young people and families, and considering a safeguarding approach as well. (AM, P18)

I think there's been a very definite shift really looking back. (AM, P7)

Mobilising the Approach: Sharing Learning and Expertise

The success of the VPU in creating system change lies in the ability of its partners to mobilise and transform the development and delivery of violence prevention activities. Many associate members described the importance of sharing learning and expertise, in terms of implementing a public health approach to violence prevention. Many acknowledged this process as being more than attending meetings and advocating for a public health approach and described their endeavours to embed this approach across their networks and partnerships. It was evident within many of the interviews that some partners have already seen benefits from this way of working, whilst others are just at the start of their journey.

A lot of it is information sharing and looking at what can we do to assist you in spreading the message reducing violence. (AM, P5)

I think also on an operational level, the kind of nature of being part of a collaborative programme has really enabled us to raise awareness of the services. (AM, P10)

I'm kind of trying to join those dots, and share that learning really, and just making sure then that anything that is commissioned, the people who deliver that piece of work understand the role of the VPU. (AM, P2)

It's all about how I think it's all about how each agency or you how each organisation is working and sharing how they have best practice on how that works...identify best practice and learning and learning measures. (AM, P4)

One member described the impact of the VPU in overcoming silo working and the challenges of being able to respond quickly to changing landscapes.

There was there was massive crossover or potential to work more collaboratively...what became apparent was maybe through domestic abuse or violence in the home, and that being aware of our offer within the same region, you know, there were those two things. When that happens, I think people still work in silos especially on the ground. And things are so fast changing in terms of what's funded and what kind of funding lapse and service has been available, it was really good to make those connections early [we've] started to say 'we're here, we have this intervention, which is, you know, safe and effective'. (AM, P10)

3.2 Research, Evaluation and Surveillance

A key ambition of the VPU is to ensure that violence surveillance, research and evaluation underpins all activity, ensuring activity is based on the best available evidence. The Wales VPU VSAS evaluation report (Quigg et al 2021) describes how the importance of sharing and using multi-agency data is critical to the implementation of a public health approach. The South Wales VSAS was established in 2014 with the purpose of collating and analysing data on violence from multiple sources across Wales; the system was incorporated into the Wales VPU in 2019. All the stakeholders interviewed for the whole system evaluation acknowledged the importance of research, surveillance and monitoring. Core members articulated their endeavours to ensure an evidence-based approach, describing their investment in data sharing, research, evaluation and surveillance. Associate members described their perceptions and experiences of implementing this approach, with some highlighting the ways they had engaged to improve their knowledge in this area (e.g. attending webinars). Almost two-thirds (71.1%, n=32/45) of WVSAS evaluation survey respondents agreed that the VPU webinars are useful to their work.

Whilst it was clear from the whole system evaluation that all interviewees understood the importance of research and evaluation, some felt there were still challenges to implementing this approach across the system, but described how the VPU was working with partners to overcome these barriers.

We collect data from lots of different organisations and compile and analyse that data. So that comes from the public sector...there's a broad kind of range of different people who are providing that data. What's particularly interesting about that is you notice where things are perhaps missing from certain elements. So it may be that there's been a massive spike in people that present an officer with stabbing injuries, for example, but there's actually been an increase in police reports. So I think having that crossover is really important. (Core, P3)

When you're talking about sharing data [between] government departments and other agencies, we need to be working either in a multi-agency unit, we do need to be given authority to have that information sharing protocol in place where we can share information....If it means protecting that individual will prevent or prevention in violence. (AM, P4)

These findings were echoed in the WVSAS evaluation, where 93.8% (n=45/48) of survey respondents agreed that the VPU is facilitating multi-agency data sharing for the purposes of violence prevention across Wales and 84% (n=42/50) agreed the VPU is improving the evidence base for violence prevention across Wales. Barriers surrounding data sharing were discussed during the stakeholder workshop, highlighting that the mechanisms for the VPU to share data were limited by the VPU not being a legal entity⁴ and thus unable to take accountability. A number of specific points were raised by stakeholders (using virtual post-it notes):

⁴ The Wales VPU is a partnership formed by multiple organisations which have separate legal entities. The Wales VPU is not a registered organisation, and therefore, cannot form a legal entity of its own, thus, hold accountability for data governance.

- Lack of understanding around data sharing/legal basis for sharing information;
- Current data sharing/disclosure needs better and quicker processes in place to achieve. It is very much often too hard to do, which thwarts projects and innovation;
- Concerns over information sharing and data sharing; lack of understanding of the policy and anxiety on when it is/isn't okay to share information with partners;
- Data sharing - there is a desire to share by all but putting it into practice is very difficult, particularly when personal information is involved. Needs to be easier processes to follow and experts leading;
- Confidence to use data and share it - clear easy methods of approval to share (when, how and who with).

During whole system interviews, some stakeholders described the communication and information shared by the VPU. Many of the associate members described receiving information and updates from the VPU; this was echoed in the findings from the WVSAS survey, which found that 81.6% (n=40/49) of partners agreed that the VPU is doing well to communicate its work and learning. Some stakeholders interviewed for the whole systems evaluation described that they do not always read the information they receive, and that at times, some of the information may not be pitched right or contain information that is unfamiliar across different sectors/organisations.

I think the VPU are also very good at sending out their kind of frequent newsletters and updates of what's going on and they have a particular update that's about multi-agency data, which I really like, because that's another thing that's quite complicated to achieve. (AM, P2)

I'll be blunt, be honest, I do receive their progress reports, but don't always read them... I'm aware that there are lots of great work, just to be honest, I've not really kept up to speed, you need that forefront of that document to literally give you the essential data. (AM, P12)

We get regular emails, which I have to confess half the time not to read through... I don't think there's any, any lack of communication... if I have a read of it, some of the input coming through, I do show my colleagues. (AM, P21)

I think people don't understand the jargon sometimes. (AM, P12)

Violence Prevention Evaluation Toolkit (VPET)

In order to build capacity amongst service providers and ensure that violence prevention interventions are monitored and evaluated, the VPU (in collaboration with LJMU) have developed a VPET⁵. The VPET provides information about what evaluation is, why it is important, how to develop an evaluation plan and how to collect, analyse and report data. A set of indicators has also been developed to support partners to measure outcomes. The development of the VPET was reflected in interviews with some core members.

We've developed the evaluation toolkit and things like that, to help service providers evaluate their work, I think ensuring that kind of practices like that are adopted a bit more, is really important, because I think that that's something you know, you have these fantastic interventions, but you've got no evidence to say that they're working. (Core, P3)

⁵ [Violence-Prevention-Evaluation-Toolkit.pdf \(violencepreventionwales.co.uk\)](https://www.violencepreventionwales.co.uk/Violence-Prevention-Evaluation-Toolkit.pdf)

It's about rolling that out and ensuring our providers and partners are evaluating their work so that we can understand and build the evidence base for violence prevention. (Core, P19)

A workshop was held in November 2020 with partners from services and programmes involved in delivering VPU violence prevention interventions, in order to provide an introduction to the VPET and to support attendees to start to identify outcomes and indicators and develop plans for their evaluation. The workshop was attended by 30 partners. Whilst many partners reported having processes in place to implement evaluation and monitoring, many described having minimal resources to fully explore outcomes, due to limited capacity within the service. It is hoped that partners will use the VPET to further evidence the impact of the VPU. The appropriateness and feasibility of the VPET will be followed up with partners beyond 2020/21.

3.3 Outcomes and Impact of the VPU

For the whole system evaluation, all interviewees were asked their views on the outcomes and impact of the VPU. Many could describe their positive experiences of working with partners across multiple agencies to embed an evidence-based approach to violence prevention. There was agreement across the core and associate members that the VPU had started to have an impact on the 'whole system', through a process of advocacy, education, integrated working and capacity building. Whilst some of the stakeholders spoke about this quite generically, others provided specific examples about how the VPU had supported them to achieve positive outcomes within their organisations, such as an increase in knowledge.

I think we've already made significant change on system change. And so, you know, the promotion of preventative practice, evidence based practice, multi-agency work in kind of asset based and pro social working...I think we've already managed to make really big strides in that area. (Core, P19)

We can evidence that what we are doing is having an effect, increasing people's knowledge and making them realise what is going on. And we also see that quite often there is any resort report forms, anonymous form has been submitted to us about suspected criminality in the areas that we'll go into. (AM, P5)

[It] seems like they're doing a good job. I've seen stuff because the number of people have engaged with them, and so on. You know, without a proper comparison, it's hard to know, if they hadn't been there, what would have happened? My feeling is, these people wouldn't have engaged with anybody. (AM, P21)

For my particular service...the officers were educated to help them to support children actually did occur, ensuring a successful outcome. I know that, you know, the evaluation of initiatives, and what the VPU are setting up and doing is very much part of the system and process. (AM, P7)

These findings were also reflected in the WVSAS evaluation, where 89.4% (42/47) agreed that the VPU is adding value to existing violence prevention and response activity. Across the whole system evaluation, stakeholders were better able to comment on the direction of travel, rather than being able to highlight specific outcomes that the VPU has achieved. A large majority of the stakeholders described the difficulties of measuring and evidencing the impact of the VPU at this stage, with some explaining that the outcomes would not be seen for a number of years. Despite this, all agreed that the VPU had supported a positive change that would lead to a positive impact in the future.

I get the sense at the moment that most of the outcomes are around 'let's understand the problem better'. Which isn't an outcome, really, it's a part of the theory of change to get you to an outcome. So I still think we're still in the, in the, 'it's too early to say' thing. (AM, P8)

It's quite hard sometimes isn't it to evidence things when some things might take a while to kind of show up, there's some quite sort of quick short term impacts that you can see sometimes aren't there. But sometimes it takes a little bit longer than 12 months isn't maybe enough time. (Core, P3)

I think they're doing a really good job, is how it seems, I don't know whether the data would back that up, or whether it's too early to properly use data. I think, fundamentally, it's doing good work. I think it's still too early. Yeah. I think the brave thing for the Government, or PCC whoever to do would be to say, look, we cannot evaluate this properly, in 12 months or 18 months. We need to give it five years. (AM, P21)

At the moment, it's sort of a descriptive process, I guess, isn't it trying to work through what this looks like? But then I hope we get to the place where we can kind of think about actually understanding what impact we're having, you know, and I think we will get there. Yeah, I don't know if it'll be next 12 months... I suppose some of these short term outcomes that you can evidence quite, quite nicely, quite quickly. But those sort of medium longer term it takes it takes a good few years. (Core, P19)

These findings were also reflected during the stakeholder workshop, where many agreed that whilst the profile of the VPU is successfully growing and facilitating safeguarding and partnership working, the outcomes of this can be difficult to evidence in the short-term. The Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) impact feasibility study acknowledged that the impact of VRUs will be 'gradual and accumulate over time' (Home Office, 2020, p.11). The impact of COVID-19 on violence trends was also raised by some stakeholders during the workshop, in terms of the challenges in measuring the outcomes and impact of the VPU. Whilst trends in violence may have decreased in relation to the night-time economy, concerns were raised about the impact of lockdown on domestic violence and county lines, and the prevalence of experience which increase the risk of involvement in violence (e.g. deprivation, unemployment levels, and exposure to trauma). This echoes research that has been carried out to understand the impact of COVID-19 on violence and ACEs experienced by children and young people in Wales (Newbury, Barton, Snowdon & Hopkins 2020).

Examples of Impactful Practice

Throughout the stakeholder interviews, participants described a number of specific examples of impactful practice, where the VPU had implemented an initiative that had resulted in clear outcomes or where specific examples of system-level change was described. A number of examples are summarised below.

The work of the Health Advocates and Welsh Women's Aid: NHS Violence Prevention Team

"There was massive crossover or potential to work more collaboratively with the Health Based Advocates, where they were seeing people come in who were injured through, what became apparent, was maybe through domestic abuse or violence in the home, and that being aware of our offer within the same region, you know, there were those two things...I think people still work in silos especially on the ground and things are so fast changing in terms of what's funded and what services are available, it was really good to make those connections early, and those Health Advocates started to say 'we're here, we have this intervention, which is safe and effective'. And the service can pick that up, rather than the feeling that you need to do that alone." (AM, P10)

The role of the VPU in educating partners:

"Everything is all about education, if somebody doesn't know something, they can't understand it. And so once they understand something, as much as people may have shared ways, and sort of things like that, it's about chipping away at those barriers, breaking them down" (AM,P5)

"We're almost like silent partner in some ways, but nevertheless, an important partnership with education. We have currently, I think there's 68 police officers across Wales. They're called school community police officers. They split their time roughly 50/50 between standing in front of the class and 50/50 on supportive policing and safeguarding activities." (AM, P7)

Vulnerable groups:

"So all people, from a Home Office immigration enforcement perspective, all those that are arriving in the UK, from abroad, illegally, we would deem as vulnerable individuals, they've entered the UK illegally, and they've got no recourse to public funds, they're not allowed to work, they're not allowed to study, not allowed housing. So because they're illegally here, they can't access any services, so from the start, those individuals are vulnerable, so they're susceptible to going into crime, they're susceptible to being homeless, they're susceptible to having mental health problems, and the wide range of other concerns relating to that individual whilst they're in this country illegally...working with the age-range of things, what my intention would be was because we're Operational Enforcement Officers, when we're out doing our work, it could be residential or commercial premises, we might come across an individual who might meet the age range [under 25], or he might not meet the age range. If he doesn't meet the age range doesn't mean we're going to ignore that individual, we're still going to help that individual, we will have to take action and intervention if we can to assist that individual. So it's all around about with dealing with individuals in the communities. Okay, so it's all about looking at vulnerability...[this] covers a wide range of things, including child sexual exploitation etc and all the other forms of violence and harm... so when we work in communities, building resilience in communities by conducting surgeries and meetings, pretty much like forums, and building relationships in communities to allow individuals to have a voice if they need to, they can approach us and speak to us about their concerns." (AM, P4)

Critical incident response planning:

A number of stakeholders described a 'critical incident response' activity they had participated in, where multi-agency partners worked together to develop a response to a hypothetical incident.

"I feel like [this] is an ongoing piece of work, because they have revisited it a couple of times, but it's where we've done a kind of desktop exercise, where we've been presented as multi-agency members of the VPU with a scenario that happens - I think it's something to do with multiple gang related stabbing in Cardiff - and work out what each of the key agencies roles would be to play in addressing about in that kind of heat of the moment, what information that they would each hold. So for example, my input to that was around if the perpetrators were known, then what would the prison and probation service know about those perpetrators that would be useful to help to identify and track them down, arrest them manage their risk, think about the other people who might be at risk or even involved in that crime themselves...and just building on that, so that if the worst should happen, and we do have that kind of incident in Wales, we're better prepared for it. And I think, my background makes me quite impressed by that kind of thing. Because we do that in prison and probation. We do a lot of contingency exercises around things like hostage situations and when those things and they do happen, actually quite a lot in prison, but when they do, we just get on with it and have a professional response to dealing with it. And ultimately, it's about dealing with it safely so that no one is harmed". (AM, P2)

"To me, one of the things that was very, very different was we had a table-top exercise as a team on how would we respond if there's a big increase in knife crime in somewhere like Cardiff and we table-topped it and it was really good, because a lot of providers in particular didn't know what each other did, you know, in detail, so that was useful. From that we drew up a critical response plan, if there's a surge, this is the kind of things that we'll do. And a few weeks later, we had a big problem with knife crime in Cardiff, where gangs were stabbing each other, a number of stabbings, very young people outside schools, and it was really bad. But what we were able to do was immediately call together as a critical response group, call together all the partners and coordinate that response which I think wouldn't have happened otherwise...even though it was a critical response all elements of the VPU were able to contribute to that including public health who did some real fast time analysis and research and the provider strand were able to step up with extra capacity, the probation strand were able to look at criminal exploitation of children by adults, it's a nice example of how everyone pulled together" (Core, P1)

Child Sexual Abuse:

"I'm there to act as the child sexual abuse person, so, expertise around child sexual abuse. I'm not sure if you're aware about the VPUs work, I wouldn't say they do a lot about child sexual abuse. They include it in their reports, but in terms of actually doing any targeted work around child sexual abuse, they don't do anything, but that's what I'm there for...I delivered a session with other members of the VPU and I focused mine on child sexual abuse, and we've delivered a session to probation officers, I wouldn't have had that contact if it wasn't for the VPU" (AM P6)

Facilitators of Positive Change

The whole systems stakeholder workshop explored mechanisms of change. Here, a range of facilitators were highlighted that fell into two broad themes:

The VPU approach to system change: Stakeholders identified that the VPU model has been effective in facilitating change, where clear partnerships and multi-agency working had been supported and coordinated, which led to a widely shared understanding of the systemic drivers of violence and a common goal.

Building the evidence base: Stakeholders described how the VPU had developed the evidence base on violence prevention and used this information to inform where interventions should be targeted.

The Impact of COVID-19

Many stakeholders described the ways that COVID-19 had affected them and their work. All agreed that the VPU had worked quickly to adopt a public health approach to understanding the impact of COVID-19 on violence, collating the latest data and working with multi-agency partners to ensure this was shared and used by professionals. The impact of COVID-19 on areas such as domestic abuse and county lines were highlighted, the associated impacts of the pandemic around unemployment and the re-opening of the night-time economy. The VPU described how they are implementing a number of research activities to provide evidence about how to focus future action, including a health needs assessment.

I think COVID has been a, you know, the challenge...for some of the agencies, they've been very, very much focused on COVID. So getting airtime that you'd normally have enjoyed, as a prevention unit has been more difficult. So particularly, Welsh Government, getting forums with them, you know, a lot of that routine business that you could access is not always taking place. (Core, P1)

They (the VPU) have been very responsive in light of COVID, listening to partners and changing those priorities. So actually, now because we understand the increase in domestic abuse that's associated with the pandemic, and particularly restriction and lockdowns, they've been quite open in shifting their priorities. (AM, P2)

An example of that would be that, during lockdown, on the first occasion, we recognised that there was a need to begin to train the schools officers in particular, in terms of how they could contact their schools, and how they could be best supporting children and young people, working with the VPU, put together a training day for the officers to participate in. (AM, P7)

Other forms of crimes are emerging from COVID, [we've] found that there's a lot of county line stuff going on...And the concern is once that the night-time economy starts opening up again, where are we going to be because, you know, with COVID, what you're finding is that there's been a lot of lot of change, look at the inequality due to the pandemic, so it's all around people who've lost their jobs, etc...so what you're gonna, you're going to naturally see a change in the socioeconomic status of individuals, and what the impact that will have on the behaviour in communities. (AM, P4)

Many stakeholders described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on partnership working, particularly reflecting on the impact of switching to online engagement. For many core members, this transition was described as straightforward and one that did not have a negative impact on partnership engagement. For associate members, this had sometimes affected their ability to build new networks.

In terms of stakeholder engagement and working with professionals, we've very much kept up the engagement through webinars. I think we've hosted four webinars in May, and we've got another three lined up for kind of early 2021. So that's been quite an easy transition, I would say, because obviously, everyone's still working, they're still at their desk...We've been able to host webinars, and we've had quite good, signup rates for those as well and good feedback (Core, P3)

I think pre COVID, we would have had to hire out a room, so a two, three hour event would have suddenly become half a day, even longer, you know, because of travelling time, and that by people travelling, it may not work. So there's been big successes, in terms of tactics and in being able to deliver some of that. (Core, P15)

Obviously, I haven't gotten to know people as well as I would have if we were all in our office together. So I suppose you could say that it has maybe if we were in the office together, I would feel like I linked in with them a bit more. But in terms of the actual delivery of the VPU, I wouldn't really know. And because the piece of work which they've asked me to be involved in, we've done fine online. So yeah, but personally, for me, like, you know, making contacts and networking, I would say, yeah, it probably has an effect on that. (AM, P6)

Operationally, members described how COVID-19 had affected their ability to deliver their programmes and the challenges associated where partners needed to prioritise COVID-19 activity.

I think a lot of the barriers are to do with the limitations of the partners involved. So, for example...a large part of the early lockdown, I was taken off my day-to-day job that I would be doing and focused on some priority work with domestic abuse cases in the probation service, because ultimately, we have to kind of prioritise based on risk to the public. And some of my longer-term strategic work had to go to one side to make sure that we were doing the public protection bit. I know that that's not unique to me, that would have been common in many of the partners who were involved in the VPU. (AM, P2)

I think a lot of people as well have been kind of taken away from what would be their normal kind of day to day move to other areas within their organisation and it has impacted on them being able to have that kind of engagement with the VPU. (AM, P22)

A lot of my work was on hold while I was seconded to do that sort of work... we couldn't actually go through with interventions...once we get back into some sort of norm ...I was working on sort of two things....So that stopped. (AM, P4)

3.4 Future Planning

Stakeholders were asked their views on the future of the VPU. Many described the importance of evidence, in terms of ensuring that all activity is evidence-based and effectively evaluated. Many saw this as an opportunity for the VPU to continue to build and grow, from a systems perspective.

I think the next thing would be around ensuring that what we're commissioning is evidence based. And just working to promote evidence-based practice across Wales. (Core, P19)

I'm hoping that there will be a continuation of the development of the partnership elements. And one thing for me, that has been really very important, you know, I think it's one of the founding principles isn't it that activity is based on research, and so that we can move forward informed and we will actually improve outcomes (AM, P7)

In Wales, what we've had a lot of over the last, probably 10 years is lots of pilots of trying things out related to violence prevention. And then they stop, and then the next thing comes along, and if you're around long enough, like I've worked in this sector for over 20 years, the same stuff comes back around. So I'm hoping that the VPU is a good avenue for bringing everyone together to keep that momentum going forward, rather than repeating the same stuff. (AM, P2)

Many stakeholders spoke of the need for future activity to focus on engaging with communities and young people at the grassroots level, describing the importance of ensuring that their views inform both the VPU activity and evidence of outcomes. This was also reflected within the stakeholder workshop.

At the moment, we're still a little bit kind of top down, which is probably just a reflection of, you know, we've been getting ourselves established... work with local areas to establish a bit more of a grassroots network, so that we can understand what's happening locally, but also so that we can inform local practice and, and help to just design what those local partnerships might look like. (Core, P19)

From our perspective, it's about kind of pushing that forward and looking at, you know, where do we go from here, now, what, what is kind of needed and, you know, looking at how we can incorporate potentially young people within the VPU, as well to get their voices, and consistently be engaged rather than, you know, just kind of periodically. (AM, P18)

During the stakeholder workshop, attendees were asked their views on what the medium and longer-term outcomes of the VPU should be. These have been coded into themes and are presented below (Tables 2 and 3). The findings highlight that many of the outcomes partners felt were important for the VPU to achieve were already captured within the existing logic model. However, additional outcomes identified were focused on all-Wales approaches to violence, including data collection, referral mechanisms and COVID recovery (the outcomes that are already reflected within the 2020/21 VPU logic model have been highlighted with an asterisk*).

Table 2: Medium-term VPU outcomes

Community outcomes

- There is greater public understanding of the factors that drive and mitigate violence and identify prompts to the public to think what they can do to support violence reduction*.
- Increased understanding amongst public of how/where to get help to address abusive/violent behaviours* (move from short to medium-term).
- Community members are empowered to safely intervene and prevent violence through bystander programmes*.
- Faith organisations are engaged and empowered to deliver violence prevention programmes* (represented broadly as 'services/organisations).
- A reduction in violence among those communities particularly at risk*.
- Equal availability to support for adults as well as youths and young adults*.

Education

- All children in Wales receive evidence-based healthy relationships education as part of a whole school approach to violence and ACE prevention*.
- The voice of the child is heard and that all children receive prevention education*.
- The education programme is protected with assurance of funding.

Analysis, surveillance and evaluation

- Analytical capabilities are shared across organisations resulting in a greater understanding of violence across Wales*.
- Indicators are established to measure outcomes associated with prevention and inform the epidemiological understanding of violence in Wales.
- A shared multi-agency database of violence data is available, providing a clear understanding of the nature and extent of the problem, and allowing services to be targeted and impact of interventions to be assessed*.
- There is a standard data collection system for violence prevention in NHS Wales Trusts.

Impact on the whole system

- Effective practice is scaled-up across wales*.
- There is Pan-Wales capacity for self-referral and multi-agency referral (beyond criminal justice) to evidence-based, safe and effective services to address/change concerning abusive behaviours at the earliest opportunity.
- All public and voluntary sector agencies in Wales are 'trauma and ACE (TrACE) informed organisations*.
- Employers and organisations take an active role in preventing violence through evidence based workplace programmes.
- We can evidence effective intersectional, diverse, and representative violence prevention practice.
- All violence prevention interventions in Wales are evidence based (based on robust evidence of effective practice or are currently undergoing evaluation)*.
- Organisations are supported with COVID recovery and resources are pooled to prevent duplication.

Table 3: Longer-term outcomes

- A society where violence is seen as unacceptable*.
- Violence is everyone's business and people are empowered to take responsibility for the prevention of violence*.
- People in Wales have increased feelings of safety and security at home and in their local community*.
- The VPU is well placed to make connections between Home Office priorities and Welsh Government priorities and can support a number of partners to deliver change through common objective setting*.

Strategic and Operational Direction

At the time of carrying out the interviews (between January-March 2021), the VPU work plan for the upcoming 12-months had yet to be confirmed. Many stakeholders described the need to ensure that the VPU had a clear plan for their future, with some perceiving a lack of clarity in terms of their focus and strategic ambition. Whilst it was acknowledged that building relationships, partners and evidence-base were an important initial focus for the VPU, there was a feeling that the focus needed to now shift to identifying and understanding the key levers across the system, how this fits together and what role the VPU will have in the future. The ambition for the VPU to be more than a Home Office funded activity was clear amongst stakeholders, but interviews highlighted their perceptions that the strategic direction for the VPU needs to be more clearly defined. The need to communicate this plan across the whole system was also highlighted throughout the interviews. The need to focus on primary prevention with a place-based focus, was highlighted as important.

We need a plan. What are we? What are 'we', what are we expecting from this rather than just more of the same? So there's lots of stuff going on. But I don't yet have a clear understanding of how it fits together and what more needs to be done... in my view is there's a lot of research, there's a really strong public health impact into it, and really strong research basis, there's a huge amount of reports coming out, lots of webinars, fantastic. What difference is that making? Whereas the operational part of it, I feel that it's, it's rather silent, actually... That what we do bit is the bit that's less clear. (AM, P8)

I really need a plan of how we're going to communicate our work going forward, kind of over the next year, and that needs to obviously needs to come from the operational side... developing our work plan for the coming months is really important... just making sure that that's kind of nailed down as much as possible. (Core, P3)

I think they should share their development, plan their delivery plan with VPU members and Youth Justice Service so we can see what the issues what the gaps are, as well. I think there just needs to be a whole range of diversity training rolled out, across agencies. I think that's absolutely key. (AM, P20)

They cover a lot of areas of violence... It's not clear sometimes what their focus is. I get the feeling street violence, but I don't think that's actually been said. I think when you ask a question they'll say all forms of violence. But I think it would be good if in the future, they were clear on what area or failure they were targeting. (AM, P6)

In terms of the direction, I think it's important that they set the vision really fast. (AM, P22)

These findings were echoed during the stakeholder engagement workshop. Specific challenges provided on virtual post-it notes included:

- VPU small and would benefit from expansion in particular areas of subject matter expertise;
- There is a lack of clear governance - how does VPU link to other structures, e.g. VAWDASV boards, IOM Cymru, PSBs, blueprint programme board, etc;
- VPU advertise as covering all forms of violence, however seems to be more of a focus on street based violence. Not clear sometimes what the focus is;
- A wide data landscape - identifying what is important and what is required is a complex process.

Funding and Sustainability

Both core and associate members described how the short-term nature of VPU funding was a challenge, specifically in creating long-term change and developing relationships and trust with partners.

It's dangerous when two months or three months beforehand, money isn't secured, you know?... that has an impact on the longevity of the programmes that have been funded through the VPU, trust and confidence in their partners to embed you into their work in processes, not knowing whether you're going to be there in a couple of months' time. (Core, P15)

I very much would have liked to have been able to build a lot of our work around what the VPU were doing but I'm a little bit reluctant to do that. Just in case we we're 12 months down the line and we thought of having to start again...the fact that the VPU might not be hear in 14 months' time is a little bit of a worry for business continuity. (AM, P22)

When we're working with trauma, when we're working with individuals that have been entrenched in various forms of abuse, or, you know, historic kind of behaviours growing up, then it takes time to embed that change, and to build relationships to be able to effectively make those changes. And so ultimately, we would want to have funding for a longer period of time, so that you can continue to, to kind of evolve really past that 12-month period, because you're almost getting to a point and then thinking we need to wind down to some extent. Whereas the longer you can have it that the better. (AM, P18)

These findings were echoed in the stakeholder workshop, where the lack of funding was highlighted throughout the discussions relating to barriers and challenges. A number of examples included within the virtual post-it notes, are provided below:

- Lack of long term funding commitment. Whole systems change doesn't happen overnight!
- Lack of funding/resource to meaningfully contribute on top of the 'day job';
- Funders/commissioners not recognising the need to properly invest;
- Funding is currently South Wales focussed by the VPU, need to understand what joint funding opportunities are available and be transparent and easily found/directed;
- Discontinuation of funding before change is fully embedded;
- Short-term funding - can be damaging rather than progressive and useful, particularly in relation to support mechanisms e.g. giving support to vulnerable person over a short period and then pulling away leaving them feeling isolated;
- Funding for digital innovation for large scale collaborative projects;
- Resource for joint projects.

Despite the challenges associated with the short-term nature of funding, many core members felt that the VPU's public health approach to violence prevention could be sustained in the longer-term, as a result of the work towards system-level change.

The entire approach of the VPU...definitely needs to be sustained. So this public health approach to violence prevention, and you've seen it this year, like, with Welsh Women's Aid, we've supported them in developing like a blueprint for prevention of violence against women. And that's very much focused on a public health approach. And that's kind of like a call to Wales to adopt this approach in prevention policies, I think that's really important that that's sustained, because I think we're already starting to see some real change. (Core, P3)

Whilst many of the stakeholders were confident that the adoption of a public health approach to violence prevention would bring about longer-term change, one core member highlighted that the ability of the VPU to drive change would be less effective without long-term investment. Here, it was noted that, whilst organisations had invested staff time in the VPU to date, there needed to be a financial commitment to secure the future stability of the VPU. Such funding would ensure that the VPU is adequately resourced with staff roles allocated on a full-time basis, in order to ensure focused delivery on VPU priorities and ultimately maximise outcomes and impact.

I've worked out that we've spent about £450,000 on staff, but we get £1.2 million worth of investment to us, basically by other organisations. So I'd say in terms of sustainability, we've already made some steps on that... So if the money ceased, it would be possible to continue with a VPU without the grant, but it would obviously be less effective, because we know our commissioning ability would be reduced. And it would be a lot smaller, without so many people as if it is their day job...I mean £400,000 on staff is a bit of a drop in the ocean in terms of the unit's structure, you know, it's not, it's not a lot, really, especially when we're trying to do work across Wales. So yeah, so, so I hope people see the offering value. (Core, P1)

Many stakeholders acknowledged the importance of exploring opportunities for longer-term funding and sustainability and, crucially, acknowledged their role and responsibility within this. This included identifying alternative funding streams and enabling services to implement the VPU model across all their activity, regardless of funding source.

Something we want to work towards this year would be getting kind of more sustainability around our funding and looking at other sources of funding, so that'll be interesting.. But I've found Wales, working in Wales, an incredibly facilitating environment for this agenda. (Core, P19)

One of the real challenges, I think, for us, if the funding was to reduce or disappear, is the ability to directly commission services, but what we're doing is working really closely with the services in depth, and I think we need to build stronger bridges with them, we can help them spend [their funding] in a really targeted way that prevents violence. (Core, P1)

We're very aware that their funding is short term, and thinking quite strategically about how to, I suppose, prove their model and be sustainable in the longer-term and think about how they can achieve the funding to get that stability so that they can plan further ahead, (AM, P2)

One of the things that they have been looking to do is obviously to get all the agencies in Wales, including Welsh government, local authorities, policing, etc, to contribute to the funding and sustainability of the VPU. The problem is, as we know, public sector budgets are very, very tight

at the moment, and the impact of dealing with the pandemic is likely to sustain that for quite a bit longer. (AM, P9)

I think that the preferred model would be some sort of shared funding with the PCC or with the interested parties. So I think these things are always difficult to sell when they're so strategic... here's some sort of short-term, get people to court, to talk to the police and stuff, but I mean, the proof of the pudding with a lot of issues is in 10 years' time, are they in jail, or are they working?...I think there's justification for keeping it going. I think there's probably some sort of need for the Health Board and the PCC to keep going. (AM, P21)

Only a small number did not describe specific plans or ambitions to explore funding opportunities. One comment within the stakeholder workshop also reflected this, where a medium-term outcome of the VPU was that 'the education programme is protected with assurance of funding' (with reference to the All Wales School Liaison Core Programme). These comments suggest that a minority of members feel that it is the responsibility of the VPU to secure longer-term future funding and establish sustainability.

Just keep up the good work, really, it's like a well-oiled machine. I think everything that they stand for is obviously needed, they will have all the right people on the table in terms of the top people needed. Operationally, strategically. I think they yeah, I think they've done a good thing going there. (AM, P12)

We're...keeping our fingers crossed and hoping the Home Office thinks this is still a good idea. (AM, P8)

Some associate members described the need for the VPU to look beyond the short-term funding, identify longer-term strategic aims and identify drivers for longer-term sustainability. The importance of stability was highlighted in a number of interviews.

I think we should stop looking at the same pot every time and really start to tap into those broader conversations. And again, it's not about going with your cap off too much, the Government is not going to give you anything. It's more about, you know, how do we embed this in, in recognition of the priorities of Welsh Government and the Home Office, what we're all trying to strive to do?... But really, you know, this is less about, let's get money in, this is more about saying, we need to change the way that we operate here... this is something that we would want to do with or without it [HO Funding]. And that's what we've got to, that's what we've got to get to is just how you would do that. (AM, P8)

One of the drivers is going to be continuing to use a public health approach that the strategic direction of the VPU is more long-term, even if the funding is not there. So it would be nice to see that there's some contingency behind that Government or Public Health Wales will pick up some of the work if the VPU ceases at some point. (AM, P22)

Unless you get to the position where you've got a degree of stability in the team...and they're there for 3, 4, 5 years, instead of 12 months, possibly two years. You never really get to that performing phase. But in order to make the case for your continued existence, you've got to get to that performing phase. Otherwise people think well, what, you know, what are you actually delivering for us? And could we do without it? (AM, P9)

3.5 Gaps

A number of stakeholders described their views regarding areas that the VPU should focus on in the future. The need to focus on domestic abuse was highlighted, with one stakeholder suggesting that the VPU could develop work with perpetrators (this stakeholder did highlight that the VPU may be considering this already, but they were unaware of any conversations around this topic). Other stakeholders described the need to focus on outreach work, engaging with communities and supporting young people, particularly those in transition between Youth Justice and Probation. The need to continue the roll-out of unconscious bias and normalisation training amongst VPU partners was also highlighted.

Looking at some of the gaps in service that perhaps the VPU can fill, Youth Justice might be that link between 17 to 19 year olds in transition between ourselves and probation, or they've completed an order, but they still have a pattern of violence, that might be an area. So I think if we can look at some of these projects, yeah, get them operating as a pilot, and then at some point look to mainstream them...and I think, stronger links as well with the Youth Justice Management Board. I'm not sure if this is the justice management board, or the VPU, where they're not quite grasping it. But I think at that strategic level, they need to be bumping into each other more. (AM, P20)

Outreach work is really kind of effective in bringing people together, and kind of looking at rehabilitation and repeat offenders...working with perpetrators of domestic abuse. And I think, you know, we could probably kind of influence there as well at more than probably what we have at the moment. Just looking at how we can support perpetrators with that kind of rehabilitation as well. (AM, P18)

These findings were also echoed during the stakeholder engagement event, where the need to better engage with communities and the public was highlighted. Whilst some good examples of community engagement were evident, it was felt that this did not necessarily reflect those communities more affected by violence than others. The importance of capturing the voices of victims and survivors was acknowledged. These findings were further highlighted in the WVSAS evaluation report, with 63.2% (n=24/38) of respondents agreeing that the VPU is engaging the wider public, including young people, in its work (12 respondents replied to say “don’t know”). Other activities that were identified during the stakeholder workshop included:

- An increase in hospital based interventions across Wales , growing each year;
- Develop guidance and mapping of services to address the emerging issue of child criminal exploitation and modern slavery. Assist in standardising the response across Wales;
- Focus on hidden violence to enable those who are multiply disadvantaged to find help and support;
- Engage in development of secure model for children as per Blueprint;
- Increase in availability of early intervention behaviour change programmes for perpetrators;
- Increase in resourcing of and reporting to emergency services and support services for all types of violence;
- Link up with work to develop the Youth Justice Blueprint and role/influence of VPU to inform activity.

During the workshop, stakeholders were also asked their views on whether there were agencies that needed to be more engaged within the VPU, with some highlighting challenges in engaging consistently with partners. The following gaps were highlighted:

- Offender Personality Disorder Pathway (spanning both NHS and HMPPS);
- Mental health support and trauma counselling;
- Housing;
- Representation from the education sector (both mainstream and those educated outside of mainstream);
- Traumatic Stress Wales;
- Better links with safeguarding and wider Early Help Teams (not just Cardiff);
- Work with the NHS to define their role in violence prevention;
- Drug and Alcohol support services;
- Full-time safeguarding lead and youth offending;
- GPs and minor injuries – key in identifying some hidden hard and less serious injuries that can escalate to greater harms;
- Welsh Ambulance Service;
- Social Services.

A Pan-Wales Approach to Violence Prevention

Within the whole systems evaluation, many stakeholders described the ambitions of the VPU to work beyond South Wales, highlighting their perceptions surrounding the landscape across Wales, and the challenges and opportunities of broadening the focus. Some members described how there was great work happening across Wales, and that this had been driven with the support of the VPU.

While the VPU's brought that network together...there is certainly plenty of crossover and good practice that we sort of picked up on and we tried to meet outside of our meetings as sort of counterparts to discuss the work. And I think there's been some benefit in that, in particular for North Wales. And it all started to adopt some of our work is well, the VPU has been a catalyst for that, you know? (AM, P22)

Whilst some members described how their views on how the South-Wales funding focus limited the ability to broaden the context of the activity, many described that a more consistent and joined-up approach was required. Challenges regarding the need for additional investment, limited leverage and resistance to change were all highlighted as potential barriers to broadening the VPU focus and/or activity consistently across Wales. There was a feeling that without appropriate investment, the VPU would continue to play an advocacy role and this would limit the ability to implement a public health approach to violence prevention across Wales.

There's lots of other corresponding programmes across Wales that would need to all work together, for example, Welsh Government hopes to launch a prevention strategy... we do already do a lot of work across Wales, you know, in particular, particularly the public health strategies, you know, we're a National Agency, so the work that we do is important. But in terms of commissioning, and the more practical stuff, at the moment, it is really in, just in South Wales, so I think we will be looking for kind of additional investment to try to do that, whether in kind, but hopefully, both in kind and, you know, capital funding as well...it'd be good get a more robust agreement in place with all of the police forces, for example, and have staff from them working more closely with the local authorities in the health boards across Wales. (Core, P19)

One of the challenges, though, and it is partly to do with COVID, but not entirely, is the strength of community safety in Wales, that it's very, very variable. So of course, you know, particularly outside the South Wales, where we're not directly doing this, which we rely quite a lot on local partnerships. You know, they are variable.... I think, as well, rather than picking off partners or agencies, I think we need to try and work more effectively. (Core, P1)

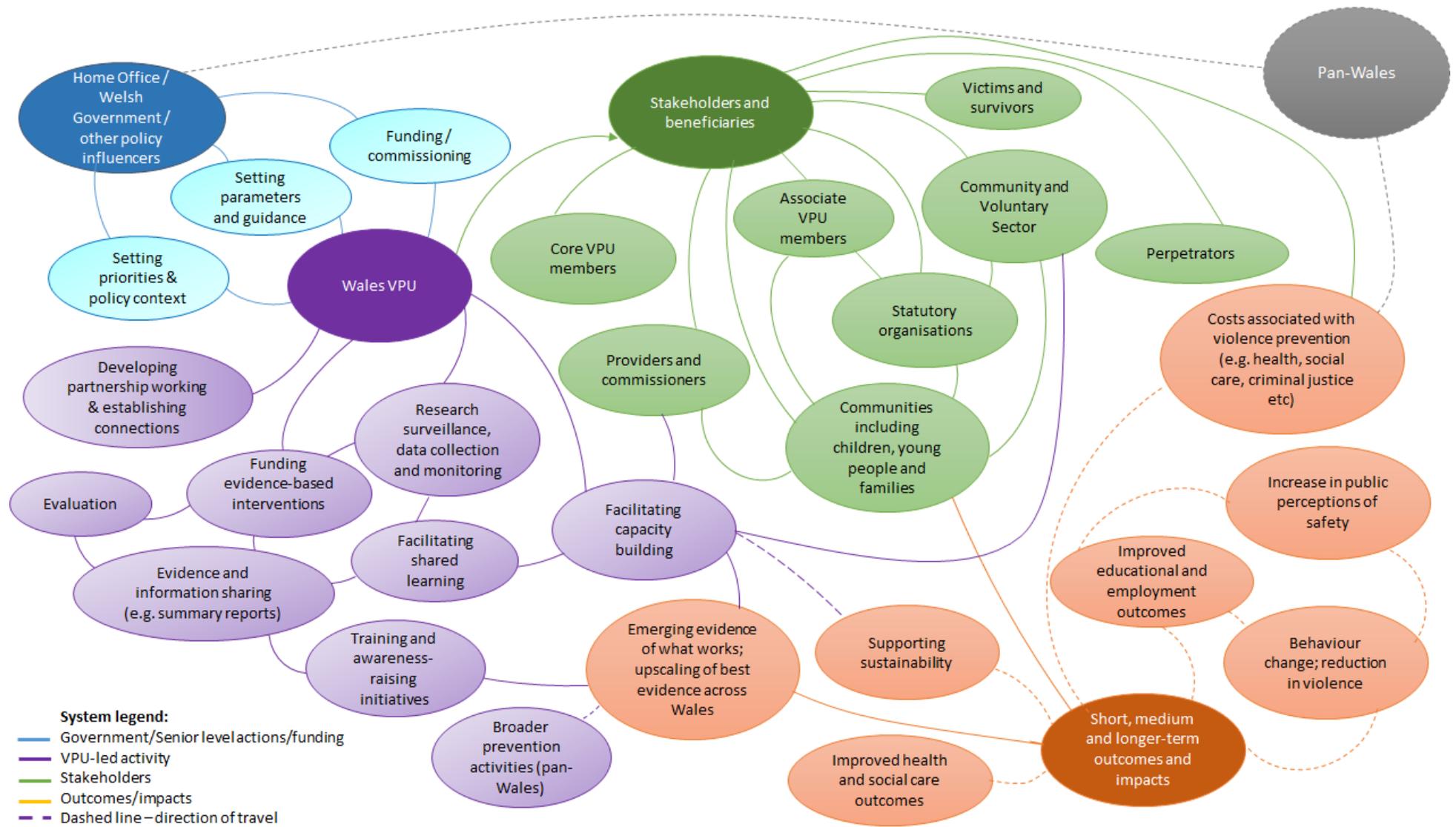
So there's really fantastic stuff going on. Up in North Wales. I know that North Wales, I think, if not well, the police do a lot of work and kind of county lines and prevention, especially with schools... I'm not really aware of kind of any evaluation of that work to know. I just know that they're quite passionate. (Core, P3)

I think we're very keen that even though it is South Wales based [funded], that it has wider generalisability in terms of benefits for across Wales, and we were really keen that Wales got one of the VPUs because of that different way of working, and particularly around the devolved landscape, that can get quite complicated and isn't always understood by the UK Government, over the borders, so yeah, we're really pleased. (AM, P2)

4. Transforming Change: A Whole Systems Approach

It is evident that the VPU has invested resource and expertise into establishing effective partnerships and networks across a range of relevant agencies. The VPU is influencing sustainable change by embedding a public health approach to violence prevention across the system that goes beyond the sharing of best practice or disseminating best-evidence. The VPU are actively identifying gaps and duplication across the system, and developing an effective response to address this. Stakeholders describe how the VPU has resulted in less silo working, better communication between partners and less duplication of effort. Egan et al (2019a) suggest that systems maps can provide a wider perspective that can inform insights and next steps. A systems map has been developed for the Wales VPU to illustrate how the different people, services, organisations, activities and outcomes interconnect and influence each other. At present, the map predominantly represents activity in South Wales, whilst acknowledging the pan-Wales ambitions for the VPU.

Wales VPU Systems Map



In terms of outcomes, it was clear that partners were able to evidence the direction of travel for the VPU and the long-term impacts and associated social value of violence prevention activities. The key principles of a whole system approach to tackle public health outcomes (as defined by Bagnall, 2019; NICE, 2010) has been used as a framework to comprehensively assess current VPU progress towards a whole system approach, and identify gaps and recommendations.

Identifying a system: *“I think we've already made significant change on system change...I think we've already managed to make really big strides in that area”.*

All stakeholders acknowledged how their role and involvement with the VPU was part of a wider system that involved a public health approach to violence prevention. The evolving nature of this system was recognised in terms of the partnerships, networks and approaches advocated by the VPU. The boundaries of the system were not defined, but the interviews predominantly reflected stakeholder knowledge and experiences of the system in South Wales, rather than an all-Wales footprint. Many partners described challenges associated with competing for funding with other organisations; concerns about their sustainability and the importance of securing future funding, which could hinder their full engagement.

Recommendation: Support collaboration across the system

- Encourage collaborative bid writing to reduce feelings of competition between voluntary and community organisations.

Capacity building: *“As far as knowledge of the unit has grown, is that we've been able to bring capability and capacity to other areas of work that helped prevent violence”*

The VPU model aims to build awareness of public health approaches to violence prevention in Wales and to support organisations to adopt this approach. There were many examples provided where stakeholders had contributed to and/or benefited from the way the VPU had strengthened capacity across organisations. Stakeholders felt that the VPU could further build capacity across VPU systems and networks, particularly in terms of supporting the development of place-based approaches to violence prevention across Wales.

Recommendation: Continue to develop training and awareness

- The role of the VPU in educating partners was highlighted a key to the implementation of the whole system approach. Include unconscious bias and normalisation training to support partners to understand local areas and the importance, for example, of cultural identities and associated vulnerabilities of young people who are offending.

Creativity and innovation: *“To me, one of the things that was very, very different was we had a table-top exercise as a team on how would we respond if there's a big increase in knife crime in somewhere like Cardiff and we said each would do and so it was really good, because a lot of providers in particular didn't know what each other did in detail”*

The VPU has a history of working both creatively and innovatively to develop initiatives to prevent violence, including the provision of early intervention and prevention initiatives to provide tailored, intensive support to young people and their families, and through wider ACEs and trauma informed

approaches including the ACE Support Hub⁶, designed to tackle and prevent ACEs. The VPU builds on these existing strengths and continues to drive creative and innovative approaches to violence prevention. Stakeholders described examples where the VPU had identified an issue or gap and worked with relevant partners to implement an appropriate response, such as from an immigration enforcement perspective, or engaging with partners regarding child sexual abuse. The ‘critical incident activity’ was viewed very positively by those who participated; one person described how they were impressed by this scenario-based working, as it was something they implemented in the prison and probation service.

Although the VPU facilitates networks and partnerships with communities, there was limited evidence about available mechanisms to support creative or innovative approaches to address issues at local levels (the recommendations presented within the ‘Engagement’ and ‘Capacity Building’ headings are also relevant here).

Recommendation: Engage with communities at grassroots to foster innovation

- Inform priorities and develop a place-led approach by enhancing engagement with communities (including community groups, children, young people and families) to identify opportunities to personalise services within hotspot areas. This engagement should focus on developing and implementing novel approaches to tackle violence prevention within their communities. The priorities and approaches should align to the needs and assets within communities.

Relationships: *“In our experience, rarely are organisations brought together, particularly in terms of meetings pulled together by the police, that brought together a range of partnership, and the focus on the community and community, voluntary sector, community champions as well”*

Stakeholders described a number of specific ways in which the VPU developed and maintained relationships across the system. Whilst many of the associate members described having formal or informal working relationships with core members before the VPU was established, many did not. Those who were on the periphery were less likely to have full understanding of the VPU model and approach. All of the stakeholders spoke positively about the ways that the VPU had been proactive in supporting the development of effective relationships across a range of multi-agency partners. A number of stakeholders identified gaps and suggested agencies that could be included as associate members or identified VPU partners.

Recommendations: Review and define VPU membership

- Ensure each core and associate member has a defined role in terms of their responsibility within the VPU. Some members were unclear on how they could contribute to meetings. Encourage membership to be a reciprocal two-way process, where all members benefit from the VPU and the VPU benefits from all members.

⁶ <https://aceawarewales.com/about/>

- Review and assess current VPU membership. Consider including representation from the agencies highlighted during stakeholder interviews and the stakeholder workshop (Early Help, Social Services, Drug and Alcohol Support Services, Offender Personality Disorder Pathway [spanning both NHS and HMPPS], Mental Health Support and Trauma Counsellors, Housing, the education sector [both mainstream and those educated outside of mainstream], Traumatic Stress Wales, links with safeguarding and wider Early Help Teams [not just Cardiff], full-time safeguarding lead and youth offending, GPs and minor injury units [key in identifying some hidden hard and less serious injuries that can escalate to greater harms] and the Welsh Ambulance Service).

Engagement: *Moving beyond a 'place-based approach' to a 'place-led approach'*

The evaluation found examples of pockets of good practice in relation to community engagement, however there was limited evidence about the ways in which people, organisations and sectors were engaging community members in programme development and delivery. Whilst community engagement and outreach was described as an area for future focus, opportunities for co-production and the development of innovative interventions should also be considered. Stakeholders spoke about the need to build the evidence base around what works for violence prevention, with anticipation that more primary prevention would result.

Recommendations: Engage at grassroots level

- Work with local communities to co-produce violence prevention interventions, moving away from a 'top-down' approach to engage more collaboratively with local community groups and those working at grassroots level, including with young people and families affected by violence and/or at risk of violence.
- Ensure the voices of victims and survivors are included/experts by experience
- Focus on outreach work and engaging with communities to better support young people, for example, from transition from Youth Justice Service to Probation.
- Include a focus on perpetrators, capturing their voice and developing programmes to reduce repeated episodes of violent behaviour.

Communication: *"I don't think there's any lack of communication"*

Many examples were provided about how the VPU supports communication between sectors and organisations within the system. The majority of VPU members were aware of the overarching ambitions of the unit and it was clear from the examples given that members were aware of their role and responsibilities within this. The strong evidence for partnership working and networks also adds to the evidence that communication between organisations is strengthened as a result of the VPU. From a practical perspective, many described the communications (e.g. resources and information distributed) by the VPU, although not all read this information. Many described how the webinars had been well received. In terms of future planning, some stakeholders described the need to ensure that the longer-term ambitions of the VPU were communicated to all partners involved across the system.

Recommendations: Consideration of communication methods

- Continue to deliver webinars and use these as a vehicle to communicate research and evaluation activity and outcomes to partners.
- Consider alternative methods to deliver the monitoring reports; explore how information could be communicated more effectively to ensure all partners not only receive this information but that they read and understand it.

Embedded action and policies: *“This is where I want to really go where we're much more influential on Welsh Government policy, spending priorities, you know, genuinely that that is affecting, you know, big decisions”*

VPU members described the ways in which their role as core or associate members had enabled them to embed a public health approach to violence prevention across their organisations, with many feeling that system change was already evident. Many members acknowledged how system change is more than sharing best practice and attending meetings, that system change requires capacity building and the actions of partners to mobilise activity and embed policy across relevant organisations. Many agreed that this was an evolving process that would strengthen and grow as the VPU becomes more established.

Recommendations: Refine and communicate the strategic direction of the VPU

- Develop a clear plan for the immediate and longer-term strategic direction of the VPU and communicate this with partners across the system. This may include clarity around interventions funded by the VPU, and information on how this is decided upon, in terms of evidence-base, value for money and sustainability.
- Ensure that the operational aspect of the VPU is clearly defined, highlighting the specific deliverables and functions of the VPU. Ensure this is communicated to partners across the system, to ensure all stakeholders and beneficiaries are aware of their role within the VPU, from a whole system perspective.
- Ensure governance between the VPU and other structures is clear e.g. VAWDASV boards, IOM Cymru, PSBs, Blueprint Programme Board.
- Engage with partners to ensure the VPU is included on high-level government policy agendas.
- Broaden VPU networks and partnerships beyond South Wales, ensuring that the delivery of violence prevention activity is based on a public health and evidence-based approach. Take account of differing political priorities and ensure this is implemented consistently across the system.
- Carry out an audit or mapping of local partnerships and networks across Wales in order to identify gaps and opportunities to inform how the VPU can upscale delivery and impact across Wales.

Robust and sustainable: *“The fact that the VPU might not be here in 14-months’ time is a little bit of a worry for business continuity”*

Whilst the VPU is currently reliant on external Home Office funding, many stakeholders described their ambitions to become a sustainable entity. Although many described the challenges associated with short-term funding, many acknowledged their role and responsibility in ensuring that a public health approach to violence prevention becomes embedded across the whole system. Examples were provided where the VPU could work with all agencies to embed this approach, regardless of their funding stream, and of where the VPU could seek alternative funding opportunities. Some members described their concerns about sustainability and were cautious about building relationships and trust with agencies and communities if the VPU could cease to exist. The recommendations to refine the strategic direction of the VPU and support collaboration across the system are relevant here and will support the sustainability of third sector organisations.

Facilitative leadership: *“This is not us empire building, it starts with that focus on a mission of preventing violence”*

It was evident across all interviews that the VPU has provided strong leadership and strategic support. This has resulted in the development and implementation of violence prevention activity that is starting to create change across the whole system. The development of the ‘four As’ approach and membership model provides a clear framework for the VPU. Members described how the VPU had taken a more selective approach to membership as time had progressed and gaps had become clear. It was clear that the mission of the VPU was to prevent violence and facilitate this across the whole system without being precious about who does what. Some stakeholders described challenges associated with competing interests and reduced resources.

Whilst VPU leadership is strong, the evidence from this evaluation showed that stakeholders tended to focus on the ‘top-down’ aspects of VPU leadership. Future considerations for the VPU could include incorporating co-production at the grassroots level, ensuring that the community voice is used to influence VPU direction, and moving the VPU from a place-based to a place-led approach.

Recommendations: Facilitate co-productive practice that influences leadership

- Build on the community engagement initiatives to focus on working at grassroots level to co-produce violence prevention interventions;
- Provide opportunities for ‘lay-members’ to represent the voice of the community and influence the strategic and operational direction of the VPU;
- Ensure this activity is monitored and evaluated to evidence the impact of this co-production on communities.

Monitoring and evaluation: *“That’s a very unique and a really exciting place to kind of be because we work frequently with academic partners and we have a lot of skills within our team to do that, but we have a lot more influence locally because we’re able to inform what’s happening on the ground”*

The VPU are committed to ensuring that violence surveillance, research and evaluation underpins all activity and this was acknowledged by all stakeholders. The VPU have invested a resource and capacity into developing and disseminating evidence and are committed to embedding evidence-based practice into violence prevention initiatives. The investment into the WVSAS and the VPET are

examples of this. A number of recommendations specific to the WVSAS are included within the separate WVSAS evaluation report and should be considered alongside the whole system recommendations.

Recommendations: Research, evaluation and monitoring

- Continuing to measure outcomes to ensure that the VPU can evidence the direction of travel and the longer-term impacts associated with the overarching aims and objectives of the VPU. Reflect on how these align with the Key Performance Indicators set out by the Home Office.
- Continue to embed evaluation across VPU activity and explore if/how the VPET has been adopted and implemented across partner organisations. Use the evidence to understand what works for violence prevention and upscale best practice whilst also identifying what is not working effectively. Use this evidence to inform funding decisions and underpin the work of the VPU and communicate this to VPU partners.
- Provide clarity about the role of the VPU in managing and collating data. Consider developing a Memorandum of Understanding between partners that details what the VPU will do with any data they provide and why this is being requested. Communicate the purpose of the data analysis and how this helps inform the wider picture of violence prevention/activities across Wales.
- Align data to build a picture of a young person's journey through different services, understanding strengths, gaps and areas for development (in terms of specific services, attitudes and environment).

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