Evaluation of the Bedfordshire Violence and Exploitation Reduction Unit (VERU)

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1   Introduction

Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) were introduced in 2019 to 18 police force areas as part of the government response to serious violence[1]. The intention is for VRUs to lead and coordinate a preventative, whole-system approach to violence reduction, through the following activities:

- multi-agency working
- data sharing and analysis
- engaging young people and communities
- commissioning (and delivering) evidence-based interventions

VRUs are modelled on a public health approach, which views the problem of violence as a public health epidemic, with a range of social, cultural and economic causes (Bellis et al, 2012; Pitts, 2019; Slutkin et al, 2018). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) defines the public health approach as seeking 'to improve the health and safety of all individuals by addressing underlying risk factors'. Importantly, this includes the underpinning structural drivers, such as social and economic deprivation, poor housing and unemployment. Therefore, in order to tackle violence:

a) all parts of a local system need to be involved, including statutory services, the voluntary sector, local communities and those affected by violence
b) activity needs to address the drivers of violence at four levels: individual, relational, community and societal (Fraser & Irwin-Rogers, 2021)

Evaluating impact at a system level is recognised as being extremely challenging (HM Treasury, 2020). A public health approach targets multiple layers through the involvement of multiple partners. Activities include specific interventions, such as mentoring programmes or A&E navigators. These are easier to evaluate. Although still emergent, there is growing evidence about what interventions are effective at reducing violence (Youth Endowment Foundation Toolkit). However at a systems level, the work is aiming to change attitudes (e.g. through communication campaigns; education sessions in schools; one-to-one working) and strengthen multi-agency working. These are much harder to evaluate and link to any reduction in violence. There are many other factors that could have influenced change, as evidenced by the example of the Glasgow VRU (McVie et al, 2018). This is compounded by the length of time required for systems change of this nature to make a measurable difference.

The latest national evaluation of VRUs did not find any statistically significant impacts on the primary outcome of hospital admissions for sharp object violent injury or homicides. There was some evidence of a reduction in hospital admissions for any violent injury and a possible impact on police recorded violence with injury and violence in 'hot spots' (Home Office, 2023). The evaluation made the following recommendations:

- In order to work towards evidencing change, analysis needs to include sub-area level data
- Ensure the involvement of young people and the community
- Ensure commissioned services meet need & have evidence base

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/violence-reduction-units-vrus

- Develop a monitoring and evaluation strategy

This report will demonstrate the significant progress Beds VERU is making with regard to these recommendations.

1.1 Evaluation

This report sets out the findings from an evaluation of the Bedfordshire (Beds) Violence and Exploitation Reduction Unit (VERU) carried out by the University of Bedfordshire between September to December 2023. The Principal Investigator was Alice Yeo, from the Safer Young Lives Research Centre[2]. Additional staff from the School of Applied Social Sciences[3] were also part of the team: Dr Nenadi Adamu, Dr Isabelle Brodie, Dr Andrew Malcolm, Dr Sandra Roper, Jonathan South and Dr Roma Thomas.

There were three core elements to the evaluation as summarised in this infographic (FIGURE 1):
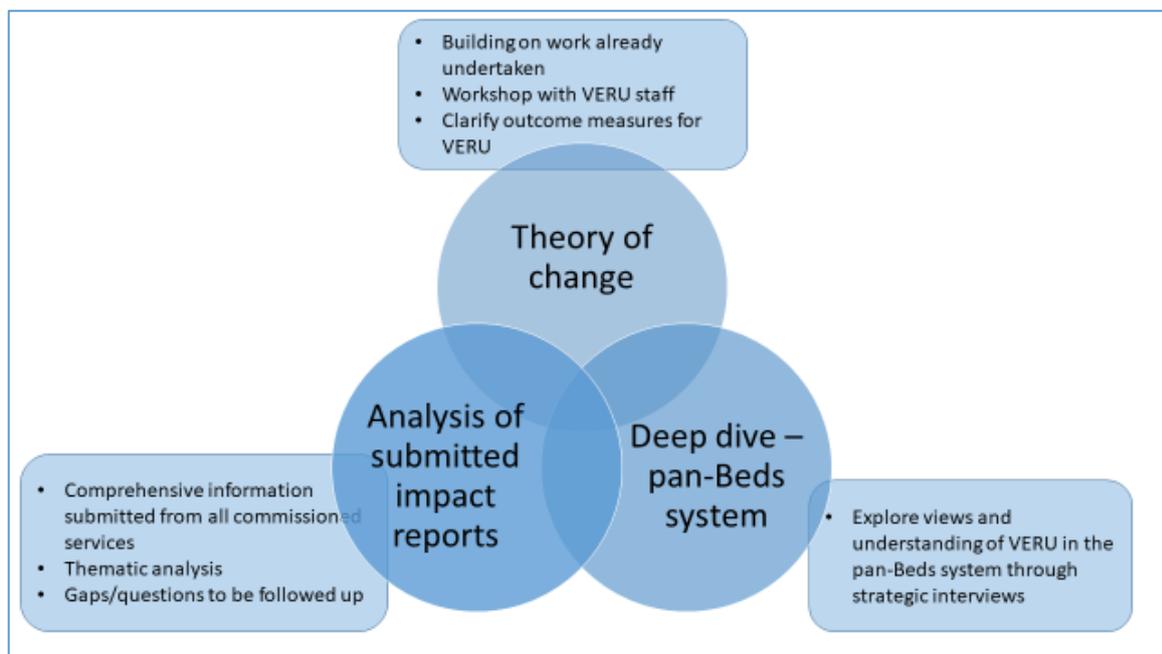
The rationale for each element is set out below.

Due to reasons beyond their control, the evaluation of the VERU for 2021-2022 was not completed. Therefore, this research draws on the work of the previous evaluators and the impact reports submitted 2021-22. The interviews, whilst exploring the evolution of relationships and partnership working, going back to 2021-2022, they also inevitably covered the current state of play. Care is taken throughout the report to be clear about the time period being discussed and reported.

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[2] https://www.beds.ac.uk/sylrc/
[3] https://www.beds.ac.uk/howtoapply/departments/appliedsocialsciences/

1.1.1 Theory of Change

Development of the Theory of Change (ToC) was already underway as part of the previous evaluation, so the aim in this evaluation was to review, refine and complete the ToC for use in the VERU's ongoing work. It is vital that Theories of Change are 'owned' by the team or organisation that are going to be using it (Noble, 2019). Therefore an initial workshop was held with all staff to discuss and explore key components of the ToC, particularly outcome measurement. A draft was shared with the team for comments, and the model was then revised. The iterative nature of Theories of Change was emphasised with the team; it should evolve alongside the development of the VERU's work.

1.1.2 Analysis of impact reports from commissioned services

Commissioned projects had submitted detailed evaluation reports for the year 2021 - 2022 to the VERU meaning it was possible to analyse these to evaluate impact rather than add unnecessary research burden by going back to conduct interviews. In total, 17 reports out of 22 commissioned services were coded thematically using NVivo, then analysed to identify patterns, themes and insights.

1.1.3 Deep dive across Bedfordshire

Partnership working is a fundamental part of how VRUs operate (Home Office, 2020), however has not been a focus in most of the VRU evaluations. Quigg et al (2023) highlight the importance of looking at the whole system not just interventions when evaluating VRUs. Reflecting its central importance, the third element of the evaluation set out to explore VERU's position within the complex landscape of Bedfordshire: across Central Bedfordshire Council, Luton Borough Council and Bedford Borough Council.

This was achieved by conducting a series of interviews with:

- multi-agency strategic leaders from across Bedfordshire
- the VERU team
- commissioned services.

The aim was to explore views and experiences, highlighting areas of synergy and difference to provide recommendations going forward. This will be able to provide important learning across the country to other VRUs.

23 interviews were carried out between October and December 2023. Conducted using a topic guide setting out the key areas to explore, the interviews lasted between 25 minutes to over an hour. Participants were identified by the VERU team and included strategic leaders from across Bedfordshire from agencies working with youth violence and exploitation. These included:

- local authorities
- children's social care
- youth offending teams
- community safety partnerships
- police
- health

Unfortunately, it was not possible to interview education representatives within the time frame of the project. It was also not possible to include participants from all different levels in all three local authority areas. Given the VERU's role in leading the strategic direction for Bedfordshire on responding to youth violence and exploitation, it was decided that this was the level most important to understand at this time. However, it is likely that operational staff will be more familiar with the work that the VERU are doing on the ground. Their views and experiences would be valuable to explore in future evaluation activity.

Interviews were audio recorded with permission and transcribed for analysis. Transcripts were managed and analysed using Framework, a systematic approach to qualitative data management (Spencer et al., 2013). Columns represent key themes and data from each participant's interview is summarised into rows. This allows for systematic analysis by theme (column) and participant (row) to explore patterns and variation across participant groups and settings.

1.1.4   Reporting

Findings from each of the three elements of the evaluation are woven together throughout the report, with the aim of providing an integrated account of the VERU's activities and impact.

1.2   Ethical considerations

This project was approved by the University of Bedfordshire's Institute of Applied Social Research Ethics Panel.

An important consideration was the confidentiality and anonymity of participants taking part in strategic interviews. Given that the interviews focused on strategic leads across Bedfordshire and the VERU team, it was acknowledged that those within the area were likely to know who had taken part. Although the report would not include any names, different parts of the system would need to be referred to in order to provide insight. This was clearly explained at the beginning of interviews. It was emphasised that the evaluation took a strengths based approach, with the aim being to understand and share views in order to highlight what is working well as well as areas of difference.

1.3   Limitations

As noted above, there was limited time available to complete this evaluation. Therefore, it was not possible to include interviews from all parts of the Bedfordshire system. This includes, for example, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Alternative Provision in education, Accident and Emergency staff etc. Similarly, it was also not possible to include young people, families and members of the community. However, the intention is that this will be a focus of the next evaluation.

2. Aims and activities of the VERU

From its inception in 2019, the Bedfordshire VERU has had a clear vision of how it wanted to achieve a reduction in serious violence and exploitation.

2.1 Expertise by experience

The public health approach adopted by the VERU is somewhat different from other VRUs. It is the only violence reduction unit to have included 'exploitation' to its title, which was to reflect the close links between violence and exploitation. It was also the only one to have an internal Youth Intervention Service (YIS). This aligned with a fundamental part of the VERU's approach: to have a team including those with lived experience – or their preferred term – expertise by experience. It was acknowledged that everyone has lived experience. Amongst the team, there were those with experience of youth violence and gangs, and those with other varied experiences. The common thread was to have staff able to relate to the local community, as the following quote illustrates:

> *'So there was so many different qualities, what I probably wanted and I guess empathy is wrapped up in all that, is people who'd had experience of life that they understood, and a lot of it was around trauma.' (S017)*

The work of the YIS team focuses on young people at high risk of violence and/or exploitation. These were described as young people who refused to work with statutory services, making the YIS team the only service standing between them and the criminal justice system. The team were strongly of the view that it was their lived experience that facilitated successful engagement with these young people and the development of trusted relationships, both with the young people and often with their families.

The style of the VERU's approach, drawing on lived experience, was to be hard-hitting, telling young people of the dangers of being involved in serious youth violence. This was particularly the case when working with the young people referred to the VERU, for example, giving case studies of young people who had been groomed, exploited and ended up in traphouses where they were at risk of sexual abuse.

When exploring sustainability, including around the lived experience in the YIS team, it was acknowledged that as a 'role' it was hard to define and potentially recruit to, because these were skills that could not be taught. The current team included well established members with a wealth of training and expertise of using their experiences when working with young people who would not be easy to replace.

2.1.1 The VERU Village

Underpinning the VERU's work sits the VERU Village. Building on the African proverb that 'it takes a village to raise a child', the VERU Village is a collective of many different organisations commissioned by the VERU, who come together as a coherent whole under the guise of the VERU Village and work together to provide a safety net of support to young people. These organisations offer a wide range of services and activities that as a collective aim to show young people, families and the wider

community that there are options available to take a different pathway from violence; and to provide these options with corresponding support.

What this range of service provision delivered was choice for young people of different activities they could get involved in, as the following quote illustrates:

> *'I think it's really good that the VERU have that widespread different organisations that are linked to them, that are doing so many different things and that's again, so if a young person needs help, you can't just go, "we can get some free football", "do a bit of boxing", "we can get you this, we can get you this", that's the strength of it.' (SO13)*

This fed into the design and approach of the VERU. By funding local grassroots organisations to do impactful work, the aim was that they would develop learning and relationships locally and become part of the local infrastructure. By demonstrating the role they could play locally, this could make attracting more funding at the end of VERU funding more likely. This compares with the commissioning of large national organisations who would be more likely to cease any work in the area at the end of their contract.

In order to create the Village; the VERU intentionally chose to commission a wide range of grassroots organisations across Bedfordshire. By comparison, most other VRUs commissioned a small number of services, often from large national organisations. The services funded by the VERU and activities of the team clearly map onto the ecological framework set out in the Bedfordshire Violence and Exploitation Strategy (2020-2025):

- Attitudinal change: communications and campaigns, the VERU Village
- Primary prevention: awareness raising sessions e.g. in schools; training staff including special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) so that learning can be cascaded; parenting forums
- Secondary prevention: diversionary activities – sports, theatre/arts, media – radio; detached youth work, employment skills; mentoring
- Tertiary prevention: therapeutic interventions; working with the YIS team
- Criminal justice; enforcement; rehabilitation: working with young people in prisons on employment opportunities

When considering the commissioning of services, it is important to be aware of the evidence base on what works, which in relation to reducing youth violence is emerging. The Youth Endowment Foundation[4] (YEF) in particular are conducting extensive research to provide robust evidence. Nevertheless, there are still many activities and approaches that cannot demonstrate evidence of impact. It is important to note that absence of evidence does not mean absence of impact.

In relation to the activities commissioned by the VERU, there is research in the YEF Toolkit[5] to support the thrust of these activities, for example, diversionary activities; detached youth work; therapy; early help; parenting interventions. In addition, the importance of recognising the

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[4] https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/
[5] https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/

reachable moment; working in a trauma-informed way and being aware of ACEs (adverse childhood experiences)[6] were highlighted by the VERU team.

2.1.2 Data

The other focus of the VERU's activities is around multi-agency use of data in order to have a more granular understanding of incidents and prevalence of youth violence and exploitation across Bedfordshire. Accessing data from other agencies was a significant challenge at the beginning when the VERU was set up, and the initial Strategic Needs Assessment (SNA) therefore had to mostly use publically available data.

In order to improve understanding across the county, the Data and Intelligence Group on Violence and Exploitation Reduction in Bedfordshire (DIGVERB) has been set up, which covers three pillars:

- violence and exploitation
- serious violence duty
- drugs and alcohol

Multi-agency partnership involvement has been helped by the requirements of the Serious Violence Duty (SVD) and consequently supported by senior leadership. There is now representation from police, health, youth offending services; local authorities (public health); some voluntary organisations, probation; fire and rescue, ambulance and Community Safety Partnerships. The range of multi-agency representation was reported as being unusual for a violence reduction unit and very positive. Discussion about accessing data from those not already sharing is happening.

2.1.3 Influencing

Another part of the VERU's aims was about working nationally, sharing learning with others around the country, being challenged, learning themselves.

2.2 Theory of Change

A Theory of Change is a way for an organisation to articulate the aims and activities of their work. Although they may be framed differently, producing a Theory of Change consist of the following considerations (Noble, 2019):

- What is the problem you are addressing?
- What resources (human, financial, values) do you have?
- What are you going to do?
- How will your activities achieve your aims?
- What changes do you want to see as a result of your activities?
- How will you know if you have made a difference?

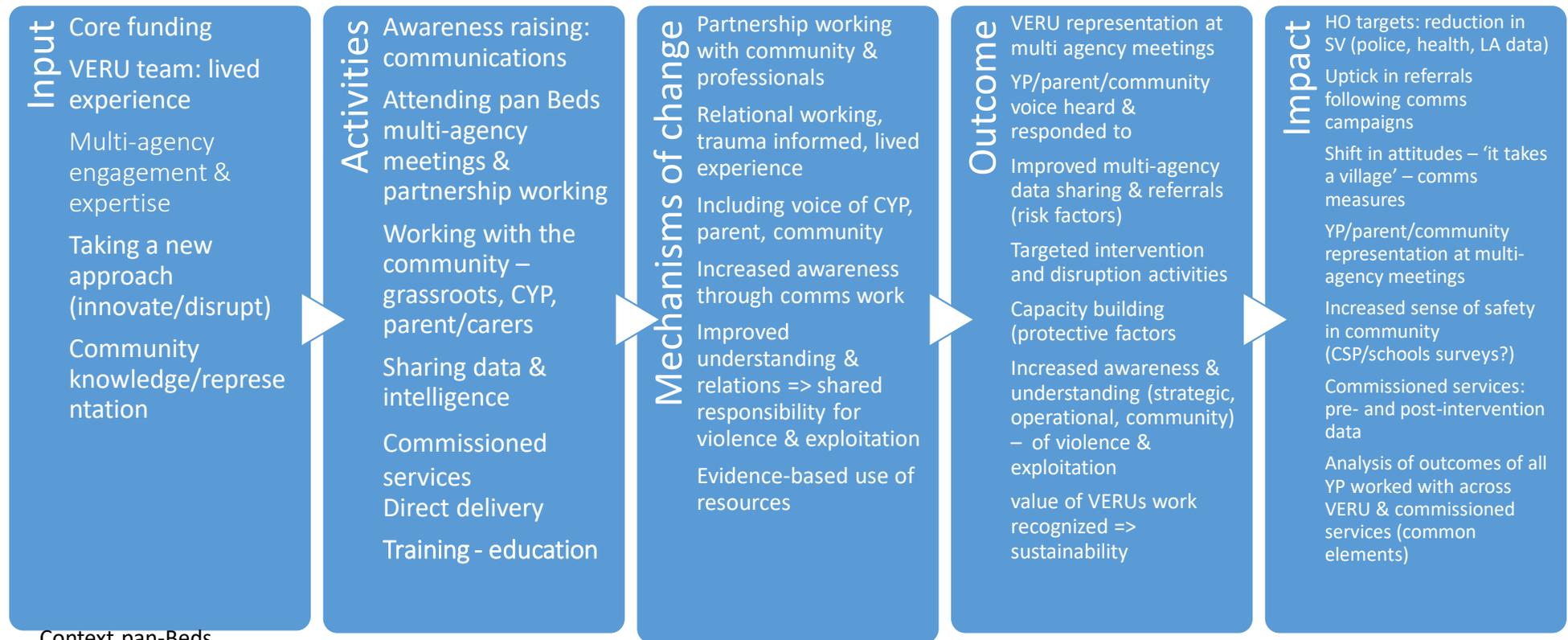[6] There are some criticisms of ACEs a) because of the lack of consideration of social inequalities or other drivers of childhood adversity, such as economic disadvantage; discrimination, disability and b) due to wide variation and lack of evidence about effectiveness of assessing ACEs. https://www.eif.org.uk/report/adverse-childhood-experiences-what-we-know-what-we-dont-know-and-what-should-happen-next

The Theory of Change should sit centrally to an organisation's work and be a constant point of reference. It should be used as a live document, reflected on and adapted as the organisation's work grows and changes. As such, it is crucial that all members are involved in and contribute to its' development.

The VERU Theory of Change was built on pre-existing work that the team had done. It was drafted after a team workshop and then commented on and revised, see FIGURE 2 below.

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Figure 2

Bedfordshire Violence and Exploitation Reduction Unit Theory of Change 2023

Input	Activities	Mechanisms of change	Outcome	Impact
Core funding	Awareness raising: communications	Partnership working with community & professionals	VERU representation at multi agency meetings	HO targets: reduction in SV (police, health, LA data)
VERU team: lived experience	Attending pan Beds multi-agency meetings & partnership working	Relational working, trauma informed, lived experience	YP/parent/community voice heard & responded to	Uptick in referrals following comms campaigns
Multi-agency engagement & expertise	Working with the community – grassroots, CYP, parent/carers	Including voice of CYP, parent, community	Improved multi-agency data sharing & referrals (risk factors)	Shift in attitudes – 'it takes a village' – comms measures
Taking a new approach (innovate/disrupt)	Sharing data & intelligence	Increased awareness through comms work	Targeted intervention and disruption activities	YP/parent/community representation at multi-agency meetings
Community knowledge/representation	Commissioned services Direct delivery	Improved understanding & relations => shared responsibility for violence & exploitation	Capacity building (protective factors	Increased sense of safety in community (CSP/schools surveys?)
	Training - education	Evidence-based use of resources	Increased awareness & understanding (strategic, operational, community) – of violence & exploitation	Commissioned services: pre- and post-intervention data
			value of VERUs work recognized => sustainability	Analysis of outcomes of all YP worked with across VERU & commissioned services (common elements)

Context pan-Beds
- Complex: 3 LAs, 1 police force; new ICB, 2 YOS
- SNA: analysis of SV & exploitation

Overarching aim of VERU: systems change – public health approach

Underpinning:
- VERU values

3. Establishment of VRUs

One view from statutory services was that Violence Reduction Units per se were an unnecessary, politically driven initiative. It was felt that the funding would have been far more effective if it had gone to existing services rather than using scarce resources to set something new up from scratch. The short-term nature of the funding was also highlighted as problematic. Participants talked about previous experiences of short-term funded programmes: just as you started to rely on their services, they would cease to operate.

> *'My slight anxiety around this is always when we have short term services put in place or short term interventions, that maybe very useful but then at some point and when we start to rely on them and we start to know they're there and then all of a sudden, the funding's pulled and there's a hole and we have to start from scratch' (S05)*

From other perspectives, Violence Reduction Units were seen as a positive addition. As bodies with a specific remit on youth violence (and exploitation in Bedfordshire), it was felt that they had the opportunity to take the lead on serious youth violence strategy and the Serious Violence Duty.

The VERU of course are not responsible for government policy. The team were acutely aware of the challenges associated with short-term funding outlined above as well as the job insecurity for the team.

During the initial years, funding from the Home Office was very late coming through, impacting on the commissioning process for the VERU's services. The subsequent confirmation from the Home Office that annual funding has changed to three-year funding was widely welcomed, providing an opportunity for slightly more strategic planning. However, with the end of the three years fast approaching, this challenge is once again looming.

3.1 Awareness

Participants from across Bedfordshire were all aware of the VERU - to a greater or lesser extent. This awareness had developed over time, as the role of the VERU within the county became more established as the following quote highlights:

> *'When it was first set up, I have to admit I was a little bit unclear but I think it's become clearer as it's developed and we've developed relationships with the VERU. Obviously, its purpose is as in its name, a violence and exploitation reduction unit.' (S05)*

Not surprisingly, the level of awareness varied according to how much contact they had with the VERU and in some cases their buy-in to the VERU. Some at senior levels with substantial responsibilities across different areas were not aware of the details compared with those whose services focused on preventing and responding to youth violence and exploitation. The latter were far more familiar with the YIS and other commissioned services.

From the VERU team's perspective, they reported having presented widely across the county as well as producing and sharing quarterly updates and annual reports. Strategic participants did say that their understanding had improved over time.

3.2 Communications

Participants acknowledged that the VERU was good at communications and updates. Some reports were described as being around 50 pages in length, so a summary would be easier for some participants to manage. The Strategic Needs Assessment (SNA) was noted in particular as being a robust and helpful document. These participants did not mention the 'philosophy' of the VERU - as set out above – having been communicated. Some talked about the VERU Village and not being sure what that meant. The relaunch of the VERU Village during the conduct of this research was noted as being likely to raise awareness and understanding.

3.3 Prevention

There was widespread awareness of the substantial communications put out by the VERU, although some felt that the information did not communicate exactly what the VERU were doing in terms of working with young people. Some doubts were raised about the proportionality of the communications compared to the size and scope of the team's activities. However, as set out above, raising awareness of the different options and pathways available to young people was a key part of the VERU's approach to driving systems change.

4. Context of Bedfordshire

In this section, the role and place of the VERU within the wider Bedfordshire system is explored.

4.1 Fit within the Bedfordshire system

It is important to start this section with the universal acknowledgement from participants that Bedfordshire is a complex area in which to operate. There are three Local Authorities (LAs) covering very different areas, two youth offending services, one police force and an Integrated Care System covering the three LAs plus another area. Although there were many longstanding colleagues, who had worked well together for years, it was also clear that there were also some longstanding tensions that pre-dated yet still hampered the VERU.

The VERU intentionally entered the Bedfordshire system as both a partner and disruptor: challenging the status quo in respect to ways of working. They expected their approach was likely to cause some conflict and/or tension. In order to manage this tension, the VERU saw it as important that they were able to offer something different that would *add* to the work of the statutory services. They described this as 'working in the gap': with children and young people, (see section 2), who would not work with statutory services.

4.2 Youth violence landscape/services

The opinion of some participants when the VERU was launched was that the landscape of service provision relating to youth violence and exploitation was already congested. The complexity of the Bedfordshire system was reflected in the structure and systems of operating and delivering services across the three Local Authorities (see section below on meetings). This was a challenge in terms of co-ordination and appropriate use of resources:

> *'I wonder actually how much resource we do waste by doing, having to do that kind of work, to make it all fit at a Bedfordshire wide level just because we happen to have something called Bedfordshire which is an anachronism from the past, in reality.' (S011)*

This also related to individual Local Authority areas across the county as this participant continued:

> *'It needs work on both sides to do, to bring things together in a coherent way that actually underpins what we're all doing as a partnership at a local level and ensures that we are making the very best use of resources available' (S011)*

It was felt by some that adding a new organisation into this space would add to the congestion and run the risk of duplicating services, particularly around youth offending and community safety. It could also lead to confusion about services being delivered by VERU and their fit alongside other provision:

> *'There's a danger that having multiple points of entry into this sort of work creates, for some of my colleagues in Children's Services for example, would they come to the VERU or go to the CSP for the same outcomes?' (S02)*

There was a view that the VERU's strategy and approach had not been developed in partnership with statutory partners and in consultation with the community, and that it would have been helpful if it had. This would align the VERU's activities with existing services; ensure there was a) no duplication of activities and b) that resources were spent as effectively as possible.

This leads onto the issue of commissioning, where there were strikingly different views between the strategic participants and the VERU team. Governance of the VERU sits at the Serious Harm Board[7], where decisions about re- and de-commissioning are made according to information provided by the VERU. In other words, these are not decisions made independently by the VERU. However, some participants did not feel that there was transparency a) about the process or b) feedback to services that had not been re-commissioned. Lack of awareness around commissioned services was also relevant here. Some statutory professionals wanted to know VERU's funding intentions in order to align their decision-making with the VERU's plans.

4.2.1 Luton-centric

One challenge across the county related to a view that youth violence funding across the board – not just the VERU – was disproportionately allocated to Luton.

> *'The perception for us often that that world is very focused in Luton, and Luton have got this very high demand, high risk' (S010)*

Whilst this was understood to correspond to the far higher levels of violence in Luton as the above quote highlights, these problems were also happening in other parts of the county and participants felt that this warranted more resources being allocated to them. They pointed out that they were accountable to their local residents and councillors.

This Luton-centric view extended to the VERU, with a perception that their activities were predominantly in Luton. This seemed to be amplified by the fact that the team were mostly from Luton. The VERU team, however, pointed out that a) not only were their commissioned services located across the county but b) referrals to the Youth Intervention Service were from across the county, with 38% coming from Central Bedfordshire.

4.3 Delivering youth violence services

Across Bedfordshire, there are multiple services that focus on prevention, disruption and responses to youth violence. These are delivered both by statutory and voluntary services. Children and young people affected by youth violence are likely to 'touch' many different points in the system, for example, children's social care, education, youth offending, police, children and adolescent mental health services. This can mean that the same young people are discussed in multiple meetings.

Across the Bedfordshire landscape, there are more than 80 strategic, tactical and operational meetings that include or focus on serious youth violence and exploitation. These are clearly more

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[7] It was noted that the Serious Harm Board had come into existence relatively recently following a restructure from the previous VERU Oversight Board

than the VERU team would be able to attend, not all would be relevant. Many of the meetings were also three or four hours long. The time burden of attending meetings was a challenge affecting others, not just the VERU team:

'The [name of service], I think I must go to 20-30 meetings a month because there's so many thematics' (S010)

Key meetings for the VERU were agreed across participants as being:

- the Serious Harm Board, which includes:
  - o the governance body for the VERU and
  - o fulfilling the SVD requirements
- the Multi-Agency Gangs Panel (MAGPAN) and Serious Youth Violence panels

Regarding other meetings, there were differences of opinion expressed about VERU attendance. One view was that it would be helpful for the VERU to be more involved with Community Safety Partnerships and attend the Community Safety Partnerships Executive.

At a strategic level the view was expressed that the VERU should be leading on the Serious Harm Strategy for Bedfordshire, but was not attending the recently formed Serious Violence Strategic Group where the Serious Violence Duty was being deployed.

There were some meetings, for example, 'Child Exploitation and Missing Group', where there were different accounts as to whether the VERU team attended or not; with some saying they did and others that they did not. This could possibly be due to fluctuating attendance of statutory partners and/or the VERU team.

The VERU's Data and Analytics Lead was instrumental in getting the Data Intelligence Group for Violence and Exploitation Reduction in Bedfordshire (DIGVERB) set up. This was viewed as being a positive development with the potential to make a significant contribution, by bringing individuals with understanding of the data and intelligence systems across Bedfordshire together. Establishing a data sharing group across different organisations within Bedfordshire, would enable systems wide analysis, identifying gaps and allowing for greater understanding, planning and delivery of services relating to youth violence and exploitation.

'An example is if we've got a provider delivering our drug rehabilitation service for us, their ability to get hold of information and data around the support system and the judicial system is challenging and that reduces their effectiveness, therefore reducing their ability to deliver.' (S01)

Godar (2020) highlights the importance and effectiveness of multi-agency data sharing in relation to tackling child exploitation.

4.4 Partnership working

Effective partnership working across multi-agency systems is widely recognised as being a 'wicked issue', i.e., despite high levels of awareness and attempts at correcting – it continues to be a

challenge (Ghate et al, 2013). This is by no means an issue that only affects Bedfordshire. Statutory agencies face a significant challenge to of how to manage and monitor the care of these young people. A lack of effective multi-agency working is a recurrent and persistent finding across serious case reviews, for example Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children's Board (2020) and the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (MacAlister, 2022).

At the same time, working in a way that is 'not constrained by organisational or professional boundaries' is a foundational principle of Violence Reduction Units (Home Office, 2020 p.16). Hence working with multi-agency partners across Bedfordshire was seen as a fundamental component of the VERU's activities; crucial to its success.

It is recognised that a key aspect of partnership working is about the relationships between professionals, (Racher & Yeo, 2021) as this quote highlights:

> *'It's like all collaboration, it's about relationships, it's about communication, it's about trust. Unless you've had that communication and built those relationships, then you're never going to get the fullest potential that you can from working together.' (SO29)*

A range of views were reported about partnership working between the VERU team, multi-agency colleagues and commissioned services. There were positive experiences of working with the VERU team:

> *'I think the working relationships are positive, there was concern that there might be duplication or might lead to unhelpful competition but we worked through that so that the [name of agency] and VERU work in partnership rather than competition.' (SO1)*

> *'After a time, I get the impression that it's become more additive rather than divisive' (SO2)*

Having lived and worked in the local area was seen as a helpful basis for building relationships:

> *'[Name] was based in Luton so it became a very easy ride for her in Luton to be plugged into that multi-agency' (SO5)*

A key aspect of partnership working is of course delivering safe and effective services. For the VERU, an important part of this was having clarity and processes in place for the referrals process and ongoing partnership working with multi-agency services from MAGPAN in Luton and the Serious Youth Violence Panel in Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Council, where most of their referrals came from.

Some issues relating to information sharing were raised in strategic interviews.

- One was around lack of communications on some occasions: not being informed when a case had been closed, which in one case was reported to have had serious consequences.

- Some concerns that the safeguarding processes were not fully understood/adhered to were raised – seen as being due to some of the team not coming from a statutory professional background and therefore not being familiar with the systems and processes.

This emphasised the importance of governance, management and quality assurance in order to avoid confusion, as the following quote illustrates:

'There's been the odd occasion where, "VERU are now doing this," and it's like
we haven't been aware or there's not been that conversation in advance and
we've not .. been quite clear about why that's happening or how it connects to
the wider work that's going on across the partnership…..That has improved and I
think there's more clarity around lines of accountability and where that
responsibility sits and how they can contribute to the work. ' (S05)

This demonstrates acknowledgement that learning to navigate system requirements had been challenging but had improved over time. This fits with accounts from the VERU team that record keeping (for example, implementation of the Oasis system) and quality assurance was a focus for the team, particularly around case closure. When the recent murder happened, the victim was a young person VERU were working with, and an internal case review happened immediately.

Perhaps not surprisingly on the back of these experiences, VERU staff reported experiences in meetings where they did not feel that they were not being treated equally as professionals. They linked these experiences to the challenges described below of being non-White and having lived experience.

One important aspect of operating in the Bedfordshire system, which the team saw as a significant strength, related to the connection and relationships between the VERU and local communities. Part of the underpinning reason for this was that they had commissioned and were working with grassroots organisation that spanned a wide range of different locations, activities and approaches.

From commissioned services, the feedback of working with the VERU was overwhelmingly positive:

'I always have brilliant communication with them in terms of not just referrals,
anything to do with any projects that are running, if they have anything they
want me to come to, to feed back through people' (S013)

5. Challenges

This section sets out a range of the challenges faced by the VERU team.

5.1 Capacity

From the VERU team's perspective, one of their challenges was around being a small team with a big brief. The team had a very different/unique service to offer, but were struggling to keep up with the referrals. At the time of the research, there were four members of the YIS team, with three people holding a total of 25 cases. As well as holding cases, resources were also required to ensure that systems of record keeping were robust and to quality assure these processes.

Having a waiting list was also potentially problematic, not just for the young people unable to benefit from working with the YIS, but also because the expectation was that multi-agency partners would stop referring to them if they were unable to take on cases.

There were other capacity considerations, relating to the VERU's increasing profile from their communications work and relationship-building with communities. This could also potentially result in an increase in referrals that they would not be able to manage. Local incidents, for example the recent stabbing, were also expected to result in an uptick in referrals.

5.2 Being part of the police

Violence Reduction Units are situated in the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC), meaning that they are part of the police. This was recognised as being potentially difficult, given the levels of mistrust prevalent amongst young people towards the police. However, the VERU felt that they had a distinct identity and that being part of the police did not affect their work with young people. They were transparent about their relationship with the police, and were clear that if information was shared that indicated a safeguarding or public protection risk, this would be passed on.

5.3 Emotional labour

The VERU team were mindful of the emotional impact on them of carrying out work with young people experiencing or at serious risk of violence and exploitation. This was also recognised by statutory colleagues, for example:

> *'A lot of the work they're doing is really hard work, it's quite thankless work, it's a really challenging cohort that VERU are engaging with, so quite a lot of respect for that work that is happening.' (S029)*

Professional supervision was available to all in the VERU team, both on an individual basis and as a group. This was noted by staff as being a key mechanism with which to manage the emotional challenges associated with doing this work. It was also an important way to improve team cohesion and provide a space where raising challenging issues for the team could happen in a safe and reflective way.

5.4 Race and expertise by experience

From the VERU team's perspective, there were significant additional challenges relating to race and the VERU's lived experience approach. In relation to race, one aspect was having the unit led by a Black woman, which was still perceived as being challenging to the status quo. One strategic participant commented:

> *'I think as a woman in power, a Black woman in power and a Black woman in public power, I think makes her a massive target for all manner of kind of thing'*
> *(S06)*

The flip side of this was that by standing out, attention was paid to what she said.

Across the wider team, Black team members reported difficult experiences in multi-agency meetings, where they were treated disrespectfully in front of others. In one example, one of the team heard colleagues talking about her when they thought she could not hear, which was extremely unpleasant for her, not to mention unprofessional. Although the meetings were multi-racial, the behaviours seemed increasingly to be driven by racism as non-Black team members had completely different experiences in the same meetings.

The other problematic issue raised in relation to the makeup of the team was also about experiences in multi-agency meetings. Team members with lived experience felt that despite their qualifications and right to be there, they were not being treated as professionals by their colleagues.

Notwithstanding the prejudice and undermining nature of these experiences, the barrier posed to partnership working could have a negative impact on their collective work with young people. Perhaps not surprisingly, these issues were not raised in strategic interviews.

6. Impact of the VERU

Measuring the impact of Violence Reduction Units is undoubtedly extremely challenging (Braga et al, 2001; Hodgkinson et al, 2009). The metrics that the Home Office require VRUs to produce correspond to decrease of deaths or injuries caused by a sharp object. However, they do not provide robust findings, because the very small sample size is insufficient to provide significant results (Home Office, 2023). Also, in any local area, such as Bedfordshire, there are multiple work strands happening all the time, be that government, local or funded initiatives, restructures, responses to inspectorates or serious case reviews and so on.

6.1 Evaluation of complex systems

In these complex systems with multiple moving parts, it is not possible to make an accurate evaluation of the impact of one strand, such as the VERU. In other words, attributing causality for a young person's outcomes specifically to the VERUs input is not possible, given all the other variables that could be influencing on them (family, social worker, youth worker, youth offending team, teacher etc).

Another challenge with violence reduction interventions is the length of time needed after the intervention to be able to confidently report behaviour change. A typical evaluation will capture before/after measures with follow up measures often 3 or 6 months later. However, when seeking to evidence lifestyle changes through fundamental attitudinal change, a lot more time is needed in order to be able to demonstrate robust findings.

With a Home Office requirement to carry out annual evaluations of their activities, these challenges are then of course reflected in the approaches to impact evaluation taken across VRUs. However, the fact that evidencing impact is difficult, does not mean that monitoring and evaluation activities should not be carried out, as this quote illustrates:

> *'You've got so many other mitigating factors and drags on that indicator, I'm not sure how much of a meaningful process it gets to be at the end but we need to measure it because those are the indicators, whether it's health inequality or numbers of lives lost to knives, they matter and we need to be aware of them. But I think we need to be aware of the limits of our capacity as well and perhaps measure the rightfulness of the work we're doing' (S011)*

In the absence of the time, resource or longevity of the violence reduction units, many VRUs have carried out evaluations of individual services they have commissioned. This includes descriptive statistics about numbers reached and qualitative case studies.

Whilst of course perfectly valid in the context of requiring a short-term output, what these evaluations do not provide is the in-depth system-wide approach: what difference/contribution have Violence Reduction Units made to addressing youth violence in the local area and how?

6.2 Evaluating activities

Questions about the impact of VERU activities were raised during interviews, particularly in relation to the numbers reported in the VERU updates and wider communications. Whilst significant numbers were reported as having been reached, participants were not clear on what difference this made. This of course is not just a challenge being faced by Violence Reduction Units as this participant commented.

> *'It's impossible isn't it?.....I just want to know if those, we're doing a theatre performance in schools, I can tell you 2500 kids have seen it, can't tell you if it's changed one life so it's really difficult.' (S010)*

There is limited evidence about the effectiveness of media campaigns, but it is a widely used tool relating to public health communications. Some research has evaluated impact in terms of numbers of hits – a widely used approach (Latha et al, 2020). Results from Thorn et al's study (2020) demonstrate that co-producing a social media campaign with young people can be positive.

An important part of the VERU's activities was delivering sessions in schools about youth violence and exploitation prevention. In the last quarter of 2023, 5277 children and young people were reached across Bedfordshire. The importance of raising awareness is noted (HMIP et al, 2016; Brown et al, 2016) and evidence shows that it can be effective, including around abuse and exploitation (Walsh et al, 2016; Dale et al, 2015) but is difficult to evaluate (Breilman, 2021).

A second question was raised in relation to numbers reached by commissioned services. For most of these services, the VERU funding was a small part of their overall budget. Some felt it was misleading if the VERU were including reach and numbers from all of the commissioned service's activities in their impact data.

The third question raised by strategic partners was about the evidence and impact of lived experience. The evidence base is mixed (see appendix 1). There is more research from the health and substance misuse services than criminal justice. However, with the 'Child First' principles becoming embedded in the youth justice system, lived experience remains a live issue. Evaluations of services where practitioners with lived experience have shown effectiveness with engaging, building relationships and relatability (Porteous & Goodman, 2023; Hudek, 2018). What is clear is that people receiving services from those with lived experience are very positive about it (Hudek, 2018).

6.3 Evaluation reports of commissioned services

The evaluation reports from commissioned services (2021 – 2022) reported a wide range of successful outcomes for young people and their families from the work they were able to do with the VERU funding. The reports detailed the numbers of young people reached and qualitative descriptions. The key theme across the impact reports was about the engagement of young people – exactly the outcome the VERU were looking for.

*'Has this person avoided being excluded from school? Has this young person
actually started, I went to the award ceremony a few months ago at [school
name] and I was struck by a lot of young people we'd worked with in Year 7 about
a year before, who were going up and getting awards for other sports or getting
award for cricket, for football, that young person wouldn't say boo to a goose to
begin with so what has been the wider impact? What is the difference it's making
in the wider community? Well, she's joined a sports club now, she goes to
football now and it's looking at those different impacts you can see and the
obvious one is to have to change the relationships with some of the people that
are around…The parents won't be long telling you, "He doesn't shout and roar
anymore, he doesn't punch the walls anymore."'(S013)*

*'What they all have in common is they all belong to a family, that family being a
club where they get continual emotional support, psychological support, peer
support and friendship. Positive relationships where they are able to notice when
something in their lives may be maladaptive or toxic. The ability to be able to
communicate when something in their lives is going wrong and seek solutions
which will keep them safe or less vulnerable.' (R09).*

*'This project is crucial to helping clients have a safe space to process the difficult
life events that have happened as well as helping them to develop safe
relationships for the future so they are not trapped in a cycle of abuse.' (R12)*

Suggestions for the VERU to consider with regard to future evaluations are set out below (see
Recommendations).

6.4 The 5Cs approach to place-based serious violence prevention

This section will consider the VERU's impact in relation to the 5Cs approach to place-based serious
violence prevention for England. (Public Health England et al, 2019): This is a model that reflects a
public health approach to serious violence (figure 3 below). The key elements of the model are:

- Collaboration
- Co-production
- Co-operation in data and intelligence sharing
- Counter-narrative
- Community consensus approach

FIGURE 3

Each of the 5Cs is explained below, along with VERU activities and progress towards each.

6.4.1 Collaboration

With the ultimate goal of systems change in relation to violence and exploitation, an important part of the VERU's modus operandi is to work with all parts of the system. This reflects the recognition of the breadth of drivers of these forms of harm that span the ecological framework for violence: individual, family, community and society (WHO, 2011).

As detailed in this report, there are a number of issues that are making this problematic, but there is also an ongoing determination and commitment to collaboration, for example, engagement with multi-agency meetings and setting up of the DIGVERB.

The quarterly reports produced by the VERU show very clearly the numbers of referrals from the three Local Authorities and indicate where there is still work to be done. For the last quarter there were:

- Central Bedfordshire Council: 27 (38%)
- Luton Borough Council: 41 (57%)
- Bedford Borough Council: 4 (6%)

With the recent re-launch of the VERU Village, there will be increased activity to develop relationships between commissioned services and strengthen the profile amongst communities.

6.4.2 Co-production

A core VERU value is putting the voice of young people, families and communities at the heart of the work taking place, so that they are being 'worked with' rather than being 'done to'. This can be seen in a number of ways:

- Co-producing plans when working with young people
- Responding to need identified: for example, setting up a parent's consultation on recognising a gap in services, which resulted in parent's forums being set up.
- Consultation with the Youth Forum
- Contribution to the 'Voice for the Child' at the local partnership Board
- VERU Young Voices
- Hope Collective

Although not happening yet, the VERU also wanted to see young people represented in meetings:

' I want to see them round the table challenging us.' (S17)

6.4.3 Co-operation in data and intelligence sharing

Data and information sharing is foundational to being able to understand and identify where risks and harm are happening. There has been considerable progress made in relation to partnership working around data, particularly with the publication of a strong SNA and the establishment of the DIGVERB group. The Serious Violence Duty is also noted as being likely to further advance co-operation around data sharing.

6.4.4 Counter-narrative

Putting forward a counter-narrative and providing young people with awareness and opportunities for positive ways forward is a foundational principle of the VERU. There are a number of ways that the VERU demonstrate this.

As detailed in section 2, the VERU intentionally commissioned a wide range of activities, from prevention, primary, secondary and tertiary level. This offered young people with a breadth of opportunities to take alternative pathways away from serious violence or exploitation.

The VERU team saw themselves as 'looking different' to the 'system' through a combination of the racial make-up of the team and their lived experience. They saw the team presenting to the wider community as part of the local area, sharing lived experiences with them, rather than being a statutory professional who can seem different.

In this context, sharing their life experiences could have two important consequences:

- It could be a powerful way of enabling trust and facilitating communication about alternative pathways that young people and families connect with and respond to;
- The team could act as role models by demonstrating the possibility of living through difficult and traumatic experiences and finding a way to move forwards; to grow and develop as a

result and to impart their learning to others to prevent a repetition of what they had been through.

The VERU do a lot of awareness raising work: social media, campaigns and radio as well as delivering sessions in schools, all of which highlight the risks of serious violence and exploitation. As part of these sessions, information about alternative pathways and how to prevent young people getting involved are provided. Between April and December, 2023, a total of 6007 young people were reached in schools. Sessions are also provided to staff, so that they can cascade the learning more widely with colleagues.

6.4.5 Community consensus

This is central to a place-based approach to violence reduction and again, was a fundamental element of the VERU's design. It was felt that by working with a wide range of grassroots organisations, the local community was well-represented.

One example of the role played by the VERU in relation to community consensus was that following a recent murder, the family wanted to work with the VERU rather than statutory services.

It is difficult to define exactly what 'the community' is, but the services commissioned by VERU spanned a wide range of different locations, activities and approaches thereby offering opportunities to similarly wide ranging groups of young people and their families.

The idea and aim of the VERU Village was very much to demonstrate a collective approach, working together to offer young people support and alternatives.

7. Recommendations

As explained in section 6 above, there are significant barriers to carrying out robust evaluations of place-based initiatives, such as the VERU. This section makes some suggestions about possible ways forward.

In terms of evaluating VERU activities, drawing from the literature on 'collective impact' would be helpful (Kania et al, 2011; Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2021). This approach facilitates impact measurement across a system, if the following five conditions are in place:

- Common agenda: having a shared vision and understanding of the issue to be tackled;
- Shared measurement systems: having a small number of indicators that all contributors in the system collect;
- Mutually reinforcing activities: delivering a range of different activities that are co-ordinated and support each other;
- Continuous communication: partnership working;
- Backbone support organisation: a driver to manage the different parts of the system.

Collective impact has much in common with the multi-agency location based approach of the Violence Reduction Units. Of particular relevance to the VERU evaluation is the idea of having a shared measurement system, whereby a small number of the same indicators are used with all young people the VERU is working with, through the YIS team and commissioned services. Using the same questions before and after interventions will provide an overview of the entire cohort of young people that the VERU is working with. As noted above, it will not be possible to attribute causality to the VERU and its activities alone. However, it would be an important start.

If it was possible for other organisations working with children and young people to ask the same questions, for example, through the Schools Health Education Unit (SHEU) Survey[8], this would start to provide a system-wide picture of change over time in the local area as a result of collective efforts across multiple services. This then begins to align more closely with the public health approach that was the political intention driving the establishment of the Violence Reduction Units.

The recommended five questions relate to young people's sense of safety and wellbeing. Questions 1, 2, 3 and 5 focus on characteristics known to be important predictors of positive outcomes for young people (Bellis et al, 2017; Lewing et al, 2018). They have been selected, and in some cases adapted, from validated surveys (see footnotes). Questions 2 and 4 mirror questions asked in the SHEU.

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[8] https://sheu.org.uk/content/page/school-surveys

The five suggested questions are:

1. **Self-esteem[9]:** I am a good person who has a lot to offer

2. **Trusted adult[10]:** There is an adult in my life I trust and can talk to

3. **Confidence[11]:** I believe in myself

4. **Sense of safety:** I feel safe going out after dark

5. **Hope for the future[12]:** I've been feeling optimistic about the future

Responses: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree

The VERU could ask all the commissioned services to administer these questions without putting too much burden on practitioners. These could then be part of the contractual requirements for the services commissioned by VERU.

Another possible approach would be to monitor referral rates to the YIS during (and after) VERU communication campaigns or activities. Capturing information on who made the referral would be an indication of the impact and reach of these campaigns. If appropriate, there could be a follow-up to explore the individual's views and decision-making processes having seen the communication.

At the same time as developing the quantitative methods, capturing qualitative data will continue to be important in order to provide the rich, in-depth accounts of working with the VERU.

Alongside this work, the continuing development of the DIGVERB group provides the opportunity to examine system wide data across Bedfordshire.

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[9] Self-esteem from the Adolescent Self-esteem Questionnaire
https://scales.arabpsychology.com/s/adolescent-self-esteem-questionnaire/
https://youngmindsmatter.telethonkids.org.au/siteassets/media-docs---young-minds-matter/validation-of-the-adolescent-self-esteem-questionnaire.pdf
[10] See Bellis et al, 2017
[11] Confidence Questionnaire
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328039601_Affective_Factors_in_Self-Access_Learning
[12] Hope for the future from the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS)
https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-experience-measures/short-warwick-edinburgh-mental-wellbeing-scale-swemwbs/

8. Conclusion

This report has set out the rationale and background of how Violence Reduction Units across England were established. Set up in 2019, the Bedfordshire Violence and Exploitation Reduction Unit had a clear vision of what it wanted to achieve.

Working across complex areas, such as Bedfordshire, where different agencies are working across different parts of the county is challenging. Adding a new organisation like the VERU into this landscape was not easy, particularly when there were already multiple services in place to respond to serious violence and exploitation.

The VERU vision, which they have put into practice, has the following key features:

- the Youth Intervention Service: staff with lived experience working with young people, often those who refuse to work with statutory services, thus providing a 'last stop' before the criminal justice system
- offering young people an alternative pathway from violence and exploitation through a wide range of commissioned activities
- connection and communication with communities, families and young people through communication campaigns and having a community presence
- working with multi-agency partners:
    o to support young people at risk of or experiencing violence and exploitation
    o to improve understanding of violence and exploitation across the county through data sharing

With time, the VERU was finding its place within the system, which was reflected in the interviews. Although some challenges were still noted, there was also evidence of effectiveness of services.

Evidencing the impact of public health approaches is extremely challenging. The VERU activities to date have looked at numbers reached through the range of their activities and commissioned services. They also have a series of qualitative case studies that illustrate the impact of their work.

Going forwards, there are a range of options for outcome measure data collection. Whilst not providing a silver bullet for evidencing impact, they could move the VERU towards more robust outcome measurement.

Appendix 1

Literature review

Lived experience

Employing individuals with lived experience to work in VERU and deliver services has been viewed as a significant element in what VERU offers. This presents some complex challenges, even while there may be significant advantages.

The evidence base regarding the employment of individuals with lived experience in criminal justice and other services relating to young people is more limited than might be expected. Although the concept and language of lived experience is increasingly used, there is a lack of evidence on what this can mean in relation to service delivery generally, and criminal justice services specifically (Buck, Ryan and Ryan, 2023). There is also a lack of evidence on impact. There is more evidence relating to health and substance misuse services than to those relating to young people. Literature regarding young people tends to focus more on participatory approaches either in relation to practice within services or engagement in research.

That said, there is a strong sense of the value of lived experience within services and for social change. Sandhu (2017) suggests that lived experience can strengthen legitimacy and accountability; improve the effectiveness of existing services and encourage innovation; enhance community cohesion and help cultivate effective partnerships and collaboration. At the same time, Sandhu also notes that social projects in the third sector have been slow to capitalise on the idea, and in her research found that attitudes were mixed, with anxiety expressed by some participants about the 'liabilities' of including those with lived experience in leadership, and a tendency to prefer those with lived experience to act as 'informants'.

The evidence also indicates the complexity of what 'lived experience' means within the context of service provision: Gupta et al (2023) discussing lived experience identities in the context of mental health service provision and research, notes that those with lived experience will challenge existing perceptions of provider and other roles. Occupying these roles as a person with lived experience can, therefore, prove stressful. Gupta et al's narrative review identifies evidence regarding advantages and disadvantages in integrating lived experience in mental health services, education and research. Advantages include empowerment; improved empathetic responses from healthcare professionals; encouraging mental health institutions to be person centred; and supporting professional learning. Disadvantages included practical and personal risks to those engaged in this work; resistance by service providers through exclusion and tokenism; queries over fitness to practice; questioning of the representativeness and authenticity of service users who are 'considered too professionalised' (p3).

Conceptually, lived experience has a number of roots, notably phenomenology but also feminism and ethnography (Rich et al, 2013; Macintosh and Wright, 2019; Frechette et al, 2020). Macintosh and Wright (2019) note there is a '*strong tendency for the term 'lived experience' to be used with little or no clarification about what it might mean or imply*' (p450) but that the term 'experience' is a

powerful one, suggesting a truth that carries an essential power and authenticity. Other language is also used to describe the phenomenon or parallel phenomena, often evoking the language of peers e.g. 'peer advisor' – perhaps invoking the sense of someone who stands or travels alongside.

In the context of youth justice, Smithson, Gray and Jones (2021) note that while there has been a vibrant and ongoing discussion of what young people's participation means in the context of youth justice policy and practice, examples of how this is translated into real world examples are '*relatively rare*' and '*reliant on those in power…supporting transformative action*' (p323). This is borne out by the general absence of examples of individuals with lived experience being involved in the actual delivery of services. That said, the 'Child First' approach now embedded in the youth justice system has helped ensure that the role of experience within the system remains on the agenda. Brierley (2023), writing as a practitioner with lived experience, argues that using the lived experience of [ex]offenders helps promote desistance as well as helping develop a participatory culture. Myles (2023), also writing as a practitioner with lived experience, notes the absence of 'people like her' when she was a young person within the YJS. She also felt there were considerable challenges in going on to work as a professional, resulting from power imbalances, and notes the tendency for those with lived experience to work as volunteers rather than as professional staff. Thompson and Stacey (2023) highlight the importance of recognising how much young people want to help others and 'give back' to peers, arguing that this fits well with trauma-informed and restorative models of practice.

Buck, Ryan and Ryan (2023) researched the work of 'Reformed', a peer-led crime prevention project based in Toxteth, Liverpool. This is community based work. The leaders of the organisation draw on lived experiences of social exclusion and imprisonment. The work of Reformed initially focused on outreach and mentoring to young people involved with police and social services, assisted by a small team of staff and volunteers. It has also moved from a focus on crime prevention to a more broadly based, community social work approach. Work has further developed to include training and teaching higher education students. The co-produced evaluation highlights how work rooted in lived experience can draw on different ideas and emotions, which are often suppressed and ignored in other services. Findings from the research project also highlighted the ways in which the project could act as a safe space for individuals often categorised as difficult or hard to reach.

Porteous and Goodman (2023) reported on an ongoing evaluation of the work of a project led by a charity embedded within and alongside a youth justice service in London. In this service 'peer support navigators' (PSNs) were employed to work with new entrants to the YJS. The young people employed as PSNs had their own office within the youth justice service. The YJS practioners interviewed said that the PSNs had an especially valuable role in talking to children, especially when they first entered the service. Other interviewees from external organisations felt that the openness and honesty of the PSNs was significant and valued their authenticity. Benefits for young people who worked with the PSNs included better relationships; greater likelihood of engaging with services; and development of soft skills such as communication. However, challenges were also identified. Both the charity and the YJS acknowledged that this work was often perceived as risky, and ongoing attention was given to the management of risk. There was also evidence of 'what

might be termed professional rivalries regarding who was best qualified to work with children and how that work is "managed":

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