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Best Probation Practice within a Violence Reduction Unit?

**A case study into the relationship between
probation and violence reduction units in England**

A Rhodes Foundation Scholarship Report (2022)

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**Hervey Rhodes, Baron Rhodes of Saddleworth, KG, DFC, PC, DL
(12th August 1895 – 11th September 1987)**



The Rt.Hon. the Lord Rhodes KG DFC PC DL
12 August 1895 - 11 September 1987

Lord Rhodes's life connected the 19th and 20th centuries in many ways: the changing face of work and industry, the political, social and cultural landscapes as well as the contribution of philanthropic and voluntary movements anchored in a tradition of public service to which he was unwaveringly committed.

It was no surprise that when approached by the Lancashire South East Probation Service he unhesitatingly agreed to be the first President of the Selcare Trust when it was founded in 1971. The Selcare Trust developed innovative ways of working with those caught up in the criminal justice system and their families which gained national recognition.

On Lord Rhodes' death in 1987, the then Chief Probation Officer of Greater Manchester, Cedric Fullwood proposed that the Rhodes Foundation Scholarship Trust should be established in honour of his unstinting support to the work of the Probation Service.

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Abbreviations

BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
GM	Greater Manchester
IGU	Integrated Gangs Unit
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
PS	Probation Service
SPOC	Special Point of Contact
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector
VRU	Violence Reduction Unit

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For the opportunity and encouragement in pursuing my research.

1. Introduction, Background, Approach & Limitations

Introduction

In 2005, two studies undertaken by the World Health Organisation and the United Nations published results identifying Scotland as the “murder capital of Europe”, and the “most violent country in the developed world”. Subsequently, Strathclyde Police developed a new approach to the intense level of violence and created what is now widely known as a *Violence Reduction Unit* (VRU). This VRU was tasked with a novel and politically progressive approach to policing, by treating violence as a public health issue. By creating a holistic and health focused approach to violence, the VRU model soon became adopted by other areas and regions within Scotland. Their approach focusses on the root causes of crime, such as poverty, education, drug and alcohol misuse, as well as developing positive community ties in areas with an over representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) residents. They work at a multi-agency level within schools, hospitals and third sector support services. Scotland is now demonstrating success, in terms of reductions in violent crimes, through early intervention schemes which seek to deter those who are at risk of being involved in violent crime. As a result of these innovative interventions, Glasgow’s murder rate more than halved, from 39 in 2004-05 to 18 in 2015 - a decade after the VRU model was implemented.

In England, the introduction of VRUs in over 18 major cities has opened opportunities for practitioners in the criminal justice system and beyond to work collaboratively and holistically in tackling the causes of violence. The *Serious Violence Fund* was granted by the Government in 2019 to target 18 police forces with extra ‘manpower’ (sic) to tackle their most violent crimes and develop their own VRUs. Areas could apply for this funding and put forward an application for the development of a VRU, focusing on regional objectives that are aligned closely to local authority structures.

In pursuing this idea, the Government introduced legislation, placing a duty to reduce serious violent crimes a statutory responsibility, for the following agencies:

- Police Services
- Local authorities (including authorities such as housing, youth offending teams and public health)
- Criminal justice organisations (probation services and prisons)
- Health and social care bodies (for example, clinical commissioning groups; primary care trusts and children’s care homes)
- Education authorities (representatives of schools, alternative provision providers and higher education organisations)

This enshrined obligation means that the above organisations need to work closely with VRUs to support them in conducting their statutory duties as outlined by the legislation (Home Office 2019).

Greater Manchester (GM) has long struggled with high levels of violent crime as evidenced in national crime statistics. The most recent Office for National Statistics data showed that between September 2019 and September 2020, GM had above national average crime recorded for violence against the person, sexual offences, robbery, criminal damage and arson, as well as public order and weapon possession offences. As a result, GM successfully gained government funding and set

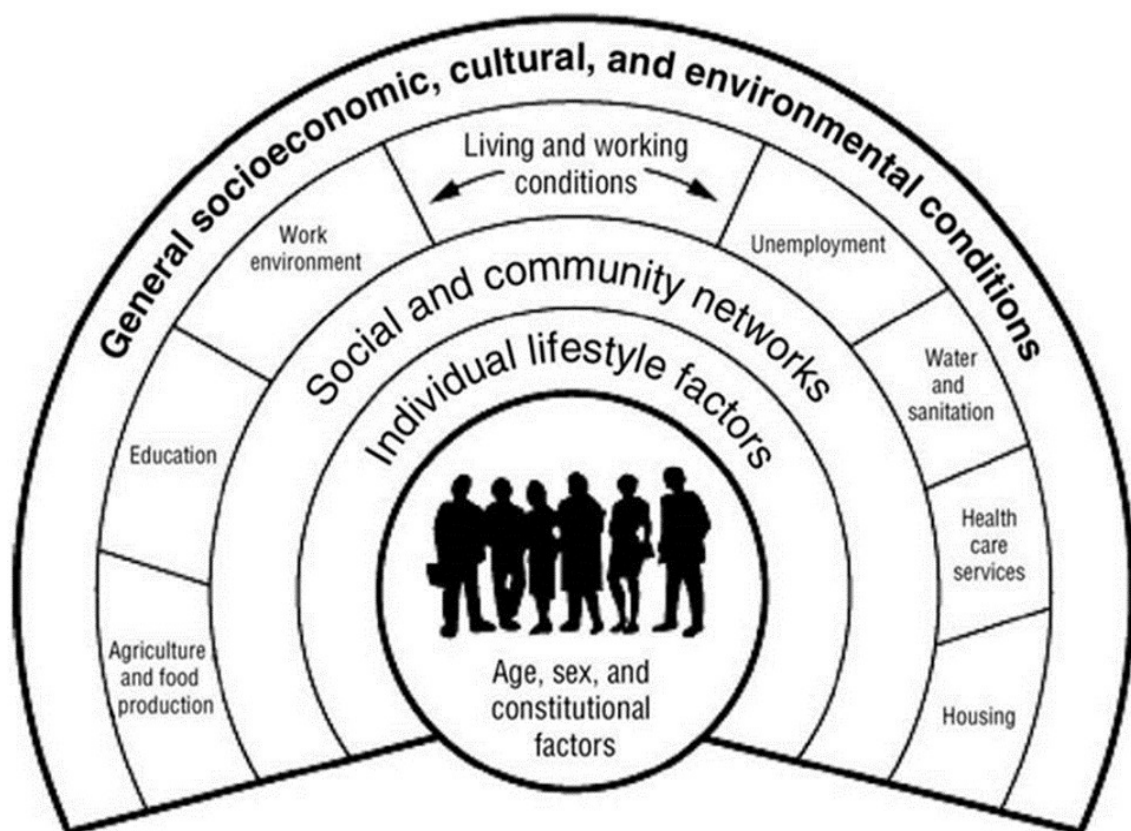
up a VRU in 2019, combining the above statutory agencies, including the Probation Service (PS), as well as relevant non-statutory community charities.

Currently the Probation Service is experiencing a period of rapid transition, both organisationally and within the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Locally, the Greater Manchester Probation Service has been partly devolved to align with local authority objectives, creating an opportunity to affect change in the community through more targeted and grassroots approaches. This has been set out and wider details described in the Greater Manchester Justice Devolution memorandum 2019-2021 parallels some of the integrated approaches that the VRUs have taken in Scotland.

As VRUs are currently still being implemented within the UK and Greater Manchester, there is much that can be learned about how to combine the intelligence and co-working between the VRUs and the Probation Service. In this context, an exploratory scholarship to explore how other major cities co-operate with the Probation Service would present an opportunity to consider what a best-practice model of working might look like when a VRU and probation combine.

Background

Public health approaches focus on the holistic and wider impact of society on individuals. As part of this, the social determinants of health (figure 1) encapsulate the conditions that shape daily life - from where you are born, live and work - to social norms, social policies and political systems that interact with the individual. This is also often referred to as 'the causes of the causes' (World Health Organization 2022).



1. Figure: The broad social and economic circumstances that together determine the quality of health of the population (Public Health England 2017)

Health inequalities can occur when one or more of these factors are out of balance, resulting in 'poor health'. Health here is defined not simply as the absence of disease, but as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being (World Health Organisation 1946).

It has been well documented that health inequalities influence the likelihood of entering the criminal justice system and being kept in the *revolving door* of incarceration. In 2017, the Government recognised this and stated that 'crime prevention and the prevention of ill health go hand in hand' acknowledging the balancing act required to prevent serious and violent crime (Public Health England 2017). It is also documented that deprivation in communities is linked to increased risks of adverse childhood experiences, a cause of being either a victim or perpetrator of violence.

Health inequalities also differ across ethnicities, with individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds being disproportionately affected by socio-economic deprivation, which is a key determinant of health in a community (Raleigh et al 2021). Similarly, the criminal justice system is overrepresented by members of Black and minority ethnic communities (Ministry of Justice 2017). Young people aged 18 - 24 are also overrepresented with an overlap between ethnicity and youth being seen, showing how race and ethnicity are important factors in the likelihood of being involved in the criminal justice system (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation 2021).

Since 2004, the political and social focus has been on preventing repeat and prolific offending, including developing frameworks and legislation to help 'break the cycle' (Home Office 2004). It was suggested that in order to reduce the risk of serious recidivism, underpinning sets of needs would have to be addressed under the following seven themes:

1. Accommodation
2. Attitudes, thinking and behaviour
3. Children and family
4. Drugs and alcohol
5. Education, training and employment
6. Finance, benefit and debt
7. Health

However, it was quickly established that addressing these cannot be achieved without charity and third sector organisation involvement to help deliver where statutory agencies, such as the Probation Service cannot meet specific needs. Policy was therefore developed by the Government to support and promote positive partnership work between the Probation Service and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to tackle identified criminogenic gaps (Gojkovic et al 2011).

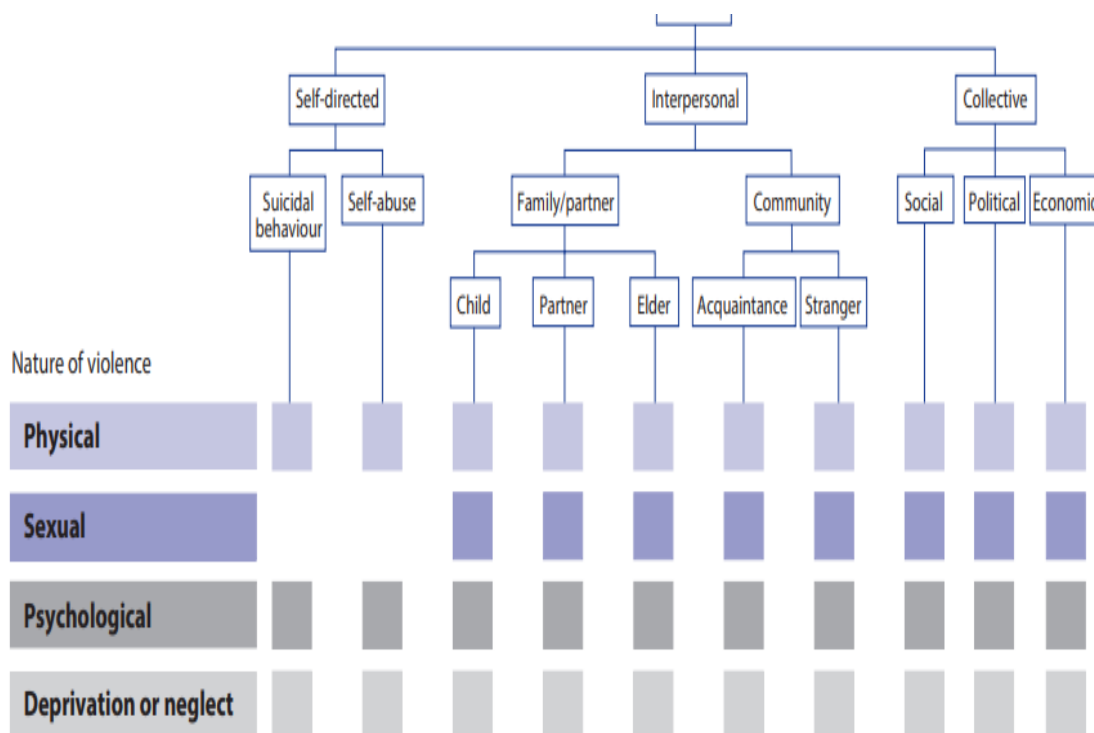
As positive as this contribution is, VCS organisations often struggle to fund projects and interventions for long-term benefits, leading to those who access their services potentially slipping through the net. Indeed, research undertaken into this co-working relationship has found that the availability of local commissioning and lack of implementation strategies for long-term plans, left VCS organisations unable to complete their contractual agreements. This has meant that services would come and go just as frequently as before despite these new arrangements (Meek et al 2010).

Recent approaches to violent crime and reducing re-offending have further shifted the gaze from intervention at a tertiary level, to primary intervention - that is, to the 'causes of the causes'. This is in line with the public health approach to violence which:

Seeks to improve the health and safety of all individuals by addressing underlying risk factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will become a victim or a perpetrator of violence. By definition, public health aims to provide the maximum benefit for the largest number of people. Programmes for primary prevention of violence based on the public health approach are designed to expose a broad segment of a population to prevention measures and to reduce and prevent violence at a population-level.

(Local Government Association 2020)

Violence in all forms has a similarly holistic pattern as the social determinants of health and interruption at any stage is now recognised as the gold standard when looking at violence prevention.



2. Figure: Typology of violence (World Health Organisation 2015)

Evidence is now demonstrating that adopting health promotion approaches to society, most especially crime and violence, yields positive results. By introducing early interventions in the key areas highlighted by the 7 pathways and social determinants of health, the likelihood of becoming involved in the criminal justice system and committing violent crimes, is reduced. The benefits of this are two-fold - productive healthy society and less cost to the government.

Research points to the many benefits of taking a public health approach to violence reduction as a welcomed approach compared to traditional and often draconian criminal justice responses which can increase exposure to violence and risk of further violence (Lessing 2018). Indeed, the driving force behind VRUs is to offer a level playing field in terms of addressing some of the significant inequalities that exist within England today, working locally and for the benefit of those at risk.

An early government report on VRUs suggests that:

VRUs (across England) had made good progress setting up their local structures, including governance boards, core VRU teams and in most cases, a local interface that was working with the constituent districts/local authorities... Many had also commissioned an initial set of interventions to support young people across their areas, the majority of which were extensions of existing activities that were perceived to be impactful... it was hoped (this) would result in a more evidence-based and targeted response to serious violence in year two of the programme.

(Home Office 2020)

This has been echoed by primary evaluation undertaken in Merseyside, where they have similarly suggested that the introduction of the VRU (also known as a Violence Reduction Partnership) has been integral to creating a robust and communicative taskforce focussing on the core problems in their communities in a holistic and complementary way (Quigg et al 2021).

A report by the *Youth Violence Commission* identified and supported the intrinsic role that VRUs are playing in reducing the exposure that young people have to serious violent crimes:

The Commission fully supports the recent establishment of regional Violence Reduction Units. Several of our key recommendations are designed to ensure that these units are given the best possible opportunity to succeed in driving forward genuine public health approaches to reducing serious violence
(Irwin-Rogers et al 2020)

From all angles, VRUs are cited as positive and important to local communities as they often have the support of larger agencies as well as the power to fully commission 3rd sector VCS agencies. However, much documentation and conversation around VRUs is focused on the initial creation and scope of where and how the money given to them is to be spent and how this will be reported back to the Government to show progress. This leaves the important question of how, when and where the Probation Service fits into these newly formed working groups of statutory and non-statutory organisations and what this looks like in practice. It is this question that this scholarship and report looks to address.

Approach

When first approaching the idea for this scholarship, I naturally wanted to investigate further within Scotland to understand how their success happened and draw any parallels or evidence of best practice to Greater Manchester. However, Scotland is unique in that it does not have a separate organisation to manage offenders. Indeed, Scotland's offender management is undertaken by Adult Social Services under the title of *Correctional Service for Scotland* after their version of the Probation service was disbanded in 1969 (McNeill 2005). Therefore, Scotland cannot offer an appropriate understanding of how they worked with the Probation Services in their development of VRUs. After learning this, I decided the best direction would be to explore the relationship between the Probation Service and VRUs in England, specifically those in London, Newcastle and Birmingham. These areas were chosen as they represent and reflect similar environments and aspects of cultural and ethnic diversity to Greater Manchester but with their own unique areas of concern when it comes to violent crimes.

I have approached this report by using a case study design to apply a real-world context to the implementation of VRUs and their interactions with the Probation Service within my chosen geographical areas. This approach will hopefully answer the overarching question - *What is best practice for probation within a VRU?*

Each area will be approached in the same way, with the same type of information being extracted for each case study site:

At a macro level there was documentary analysis - this included the examination of policy papers outlining development, background and implementation of the VRUs within the context of London, Birmingham and Newcastle's crime and justice services, including contractual and political obligations with the Probation Service.

At a meso level, I reached out to mid-level managers - those with responsibility for interpreting and applying the policy context through the day-to-day running of VRUs and various projects that may sit within them. These managers have insight into how the macro elements are implemented in practice and knowledge of what current working relationship and practice is present (if any) within the Probation Service.

The main part of the work was in relation to the **micro level** elements - the grassroots work being undertaken with service users and how the Probation Service is involved alongside the VRUs. This was different depending on how involved the Probation Service was in each area with the VRU and any schemes or interventions being run.

As this scholarship was funded, I reached out and organised the trips using the helpful links and introductions provided to me by those involved in the Greater Manchester VRU. This allowed me to make sure that I was able to see the type of things I needed to in order to gather the appropriate information and insights for this report. It also provided the opportunity for me to explore the local areas with knowledge and guidance from those who live and work there.

Limitations

The timeframe for this piece of work was initially 3 – 6 months, however, the Covid-19 pandemic caused some difficulty in going to my selected areas. Therefore, I have had more opportunities in the areas I visited later in the project than those at the beginning due to social distancing restrictions. This has been recognised and discussed appropriately throughout the scholarship and adjustments made and agreed accordingly.

2. London



3. Picture: taken on first day in Hackney of the office location – personal photo.

This visit took place between 6th September and 10th September 2021.

London VRU strategic paperwork highlights how their focus is on 5 key areas:

1. Youth Work
2. Education, Schools and Settings
3. Early Intervention for Violence Prevention
4. Neighbourhoods & Local violence Reduction Plans
5. Young People – giving them their voice

They are using place-based methods designed to make communities and young people the real harbourers of change. Having undertaken their own research called *Violence in London: what we know and how to respond*, they are able to plan with data sets and community voices, their decision making on commissioning and responding to emerging patterns of violence. This shows the importance of individual VRUs undertaking their own research to show how their own geographic areas have specific needs relating to serious violence - they must know their audience to correctly apply their services and target the root causes.

The geography of London is large and complex, broken into boroughs with their own areas of concern. For the purposes of this research, I was directed to the borough of Hackney, an area in the East of London City. It is a built-up population of 281,100 people, with those aged 29 and under making up 35% of the population and those aged over 55 only making up a quarter of the population. It has long been an area recognised for its ethnically diverse population, with the most recent census in 2011 reporting 36% of residents identifying as White British and the next largest being Other White at 11.6% (Hackney Council 2020).

Hackney as a borough suffers from larger than average crime statistics around violence and knife crimes. Indeed, in the month of August 2021, there were 210 crimes reported, 60 being anti-social behaviour, with 38 being violent and sexual offences (Metropolitan Police 2021).

Having arrived in London in early September, I managed to catch the last of the heat wave that had spread across the UK. I booked an Air B&B in central Hackney with a woman who lived in a modern apartment. She was able to give me a grounding of the area and pointed out some of the areas where known offences had taken place due to her local knowledge. When walking around the area I was struck by the proximity of the extremes of socioeconomic status. For example, the apartment block I was in was situated next door to several other blocks, some being social housing and gang affiliated, others being large private homes worth millions of pounds on the property market (see Picture 4) demonstrating a symbiotic relationship between socioeconomic statuses.

I was placed in the Integrated Gangs Unit (IGU) in Hackney which worked out of Hackney Town Hall, a grade II listed art deco building from 1937 (see Picture 2). This team has been in place since 2010 and is a fully functioning, well-maintained, multi-agency team who are dedicated to on-the-ground grassroots work. The team is made up of probation officers, police officers, youth offending services and the department for work and pensions (DWP). Alongside this are 3rd sector VCS organisations such as outreach workers. Daily briefings are held in which each agency shared intelligence and information on young people in the local area, who are at risk of criminal exploitation or are known to be part of a gang. The team had large maps with data and links across the Hackney borough, denoting gang territories and recent crimes. I was told that the major areas of concern are knife offences, including murder, as part of the ‘turf wars’ enacted by known gangs.

Indeed, during my time there, intelligence had been received by a probation officer that a young male and his family, who had tried to stop his gang affiliations, was at risk of retaliation. A family member reported that their home was being targeted by young males who were stalking the property, knocking on the door and asking for the young male. As a result, the IGU team were able to act swiftly and found emergency accommodation for the young male and his family out of the area. With the connections to the DWP, the local job centre was informed that the young male would not be able to attend their appointment for his benefit claims. This proactive move allowed him to keep his income as a missed job centre appointment results in benefit sanctions. Having this co-location meant the conversation would happen instantaneously and action would be taken, supporting the individuals through that strategic level of communication.



4. Picture: skyline of the Borough of Hackney and beyond. This depicts the differing landscape and buildings that make up the area and the close mix of social housing with private housing – personal photo.

On one of the days, an outreach worker from St. Giles, a 3rd sector organisation who work alongside the IGU, offered to take me to see one of his clients. He told me that this young man was a known gang member but was in the process of trying to defect from the ‘lifestyle’ after being stabbed 6 times on his doorstep by a rival gang. We took a short bus journey on one of London’s iconic red buses,

to an area within the Hackney Borough synonymous with an established gang. We met up with G – the young man who had been stabbed, at his home address where he lived in with his mother. G was apprehensive about the meeting, due to the fact it had to take place outside. As per the mentoring guidance, it is not appropriate to enter the homes of individuals and most meetings do take place in public spaces.

As a result of his apprehension, G asked if we could stand in the confines of his block of flats, out of view of the general public. Here he became more relaxed and was visibly more comfortable. He also made note of the lanyard and badge I was wearing, pointing out if anyone saw him, they would assume he was talking to the ‘feds’ (police) and this may have violent repercussions for him. I swiftly removed the badge to continue the positive conversation. G was open about how since being stabbed, he has tried to desist from engaging in gang affiliations and was working closely with his probation officer and the outreach worker, lifting up his top at various points to show me the drastic scars across his body as way to back up what he was saying.

I was curious about the relationship between the outreach worker and G and after spending two hours speaking, it became apparent the relationship was based on shared life experiences, communicating in their own way, breaking down barriers that often exist with statutory organisations. G is a young Black man and was keen to discuss his involvement in music, mainly that of drill music, which is popular among those in gangs to ‘call each other out’, essentially creating music to fight over territories in their local area. However, I noticed that this was also a positive structure for G who enjoyed playing me and the outreach worker his recent music via the portable speaker conveniently located around his neck. G verbalised that he was proud of what he had achieved, including the fact he had been approached by a music label who was interesting in signing him. He also had been performing at events in the Hackney area and had created somewhat of a following. I left this meeting feeling that G had plenty to look forward to in terms of support systems in place and positive role models in his life. However, whilst he was still living in his specific post code, the risk of further violence and slipping back into gang affiliations was very real.

Back at the office, I chatted with the team about how the post-codes define young people in the areas they live in. They explained that young people tell them they cannot make appointments at certain locations or are scared to enter certain areas, even on public transport, for fear of being spotted and recognised by a rival gang and being assaulted. This was shocking to me, as these young people actively cannot walk down certain roads in their own community. The team also said there had been several cases of mistaken identity, where young people had been attacked by known gang members, but they themselves were not part of any association.

When looking at the paperwork associated with the VRUs in London, it became apparent that the physicality of the VRU and its presence are two separate things. The overarching aims of London’s VRU is focussed on youth work and interrupting violence at a community level. Therefore, this translates into commissioned services which have this as their core focus. However, this was yet to trickle down into a reality for the area I was observing, as they are a long-standing Integrated Gang Unit, which in many ways bares all the same hallmarks of a VRU. They commissioned services that were localised for the issues they were observing, the majority being gang related violence. The team themselves were not sure of how the introduction of a specified VRU would impact on their roles. Could the introduction of a larger strategical oversight be duplicating the work already being done by this team?

3. Newcastle Upon Tyne



5. Picture: view of Newcastle from the train – personal photo.

This visit took place between 20th September and 23rd September 2021.

The county of Northumbria, which encompasses the city of Newcastle, has a population of 1,418,613 people made up of 35 neighbourhoods.

Northumbria's VRU strategic paperwork says their focus is on 4 key areas:

1. Youth Diversion
2. Reduce Offending
3. Working with Families
4. Connecting Communities

Their take-home statement and advertised core values are *if we improve lives, we can prevent crime. Every act of violence is one too many, and while we will never prevent all violence, a relentless focus on turning lives around can make a real difference.*

Due to the vast nature of the county, the VRU has spread and balanced its focus towards their night-time economy safety, based mainly in the city centre of Newcastle, with their suburban data sets where domestic violence and community deprivation is at its highest.

In the year from March 2021 to February 2022, of the 181,838 crimes reported, 57,399 were violent offences, 44,157 were anti-social behaviour, accounting for nearly half of all crimes reported that year (UK Crime Statistics 2022). Contrary to the smaller London boroughs, Newcastle has a unique night-time economy based in the city centre area, helped by two central universities and boosts the local economy by £300 million a year (Safe Newcastle 2022).



6. Picture: VRU 'Uniform' (Preventing Crime, Newcastle VRU 2022)

My arrival into Newcastle took place at the same time as the two universities 'Freshers' week. After the Covid-19 pandemic it would be the first-time many university students were able to experience university culture. I was booked into a city centre hotel which also had the feeling of a bustling and exciting place, filled with people making plans to explore the nightlife.

On my first morning, I met some members of the VRU at Newcastle College and first noticed their branded 'uniform' which bore the logo of the VRU for Newcastle (Picture 6). They explained that they were delivering a couple of presentations to college students who were studying public services and law at the college. It was part of a series of talks the VRU had created as part of their education team, focusing on topics which affect young people, such as Knife Crime Awareness, Malicious Communications and Child Criminal Exploitation. Indeed, the education team was a big focus of the Newcastle VRU with pilots of close working relationships with colleges and schools taking place to best support the work they wanted to achieve through this route. The class I observed that day were asked to complete an academic project on the topic of malicious communications, and this would make up a part of their overall course, being one of the pilots approaches the VRU is taking in education.

Later that afternoon I met up with a third sector organisation called The Recruitment Junction; a recruitment agency that specialises in finding those who have criminal records employment, open to all genders. The organisation is run on a mix of Government Funding from the Department for Work and Pensions, funding from the Newcastle Violence Reduction Unit, as well as from separate grants. As I approached the building, I was struck by how much this did not feel like a typical charitable organisation that would be involved with the criminal justice system. The location is in central Newcastle and is based in a large open plan co-working office, which housed other businesses. For me this was an important part of the work they do; individuals coming to this location for interview will be made to feel like a professional, compared to other common places such as probation offices which at times are not as welcoming. I met the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and driving force behind the charity, Beverley Brooks, who was excited about me observing their work. She explained to me that their main referrals into their service are from the local job centres, as well as the Probation Service, where the expectation is full disclosure in a non-judgemental environment.

During the afternoon I engaged with the small team about their roles, many of which had come from traditional recruitment backgrounds and were new to the idea of working with those with criminal convictions. This was interesting to observe as during the afternoon a client who they had successfully placed in work several months earlier rang the office and disclosed feelings of paranoia about people who might potentially be 'after him' and was worried that this may affect his ability to continue his work placement. The team explained that they are there to support their clients for 6 months after finding them employment.

The work for them was clearly more than that of just finding placements for people; they are genuinely interested in the individuals thriving in positive employment suitable for their needs. This is a refreshing change to how those who have criminal convictions are often ostracized from potential employment opportunities. It is a credit to the hard work Beverly Brooks and her team put in to working closely with employers to encourage them to employ individuals in this position. I would personally like to see this type of recruitment agency replicated across the United Kingdom.

After a short break for food at the hotel, I was back out heading to an area known as the Byker Wall in the East of Newcastle. I discovered that the easiest way to get to the suburbs of the city was through the metro system that Newcastle has which was dated but functional. The purpose of this trip was to meet with the outreach team from a 3rd sector organisation called Foundation Futures for their evening walking route around the Byker estate. Byker Wall is a purpose-built housing estate steeped in history, both criminally and architecturally (Picture 7 below).

Indeed, during my time walking around the estate with the outreach team, I was regaled with the story of “rat boy”. Rat boy, whose real name is Anthony Kennedy, was a young man who evaded police capture and committed a string of burglary offences as a youth in the 1990’s, by hiding and navigating through the complex ventilation systems of the Byker Wall estate (Chronicle Live 2018).



7. Picture: Byker Wall - designed by Swedish architect Ralph Erskine and built between 1969 and 1982 (Chronicle Live; 2018)

This imagery captivated my imagination as I walked around the 200-acre housing estate. I realised that, due to the vastness and architecture, this was a very real prospect for a brave enough person; his legacy certainly lives on in the youth of the area today. I have included several pictures of Byker Wall in this report as I feel it really must be seen to be believed as the scale of the location is imposing (Pictures 8 & 9).

The aim of the evening outreach team was to walk around the estate in order to engage the young people who live there. This served two purposes; to be visible to the community and to support the young people.

There was no pressure for the young people to engage with the workers, but they knew that, if needed, they could have conversations and head to the youth centre. We ended our walk at the youth drop-in centre which had kitchen facilities as well as a music studio, games consoles and was a place where young people in the area can safely belong. It was clear that those engaged in the outreach work had connections to the area, either living close by or coming themselves from the Byker Wall, making shared lived experiences common place when engaging with the young people. This project was being partly funded by the VRU, allowing them to hire staff and provide the services at the youth centre.

My second day was spent visiting a women's centre out in Blyth, 13 miles to the north of Newcastle. This typically quiet coastal town was hosting a wellbeing session ran by *Changing Lives*, for women who are on probation, partly funded by the VRU. As I sat around the table in the community centre, it was expected that I would also join in the session, which on this occasion was understanding other people's values; playing a game where we made assumptions about what types of food each of us around the table would like. It was a relaxed and informal session with food, drink and practical



8. Picture: Wall full estate showing the snaking line of the buildings (Byker Community Trust 2022).

goodies provided by the service. The women there were open and positive about the session and I could tell they took comfort from attending the session. Organisers of the event were positive about the confidence they felt in being able to continue to deliver their service through the support of the VRU.

My final day I spent with Rachel who had previously been a probation officer but now worked as the coordinator for the Northumbria VRU. The day consisted of mid-level management type meetings where discussions around funding and commissioning of services were tense, as the deadlines for

'proving' to the government the money they had been given was 'working'. This is typical as most of the original contracts handed to VRUs were for one year initially, with no confirmation about whether funding would be extended further. In this situation, Rachel was clear that the projects being funded need the probation service buy in so that effective evaluations can take place. It became apparent during my time with the Northumbria VRU that probation did not sit within the criminal justice arm. Indeed, the discussion that took place centred around more senior management recognition that both probation and youth offending service are required to promote sustainability of the work being delivered by the VRU. The Northumbria VRU is the strategic driver which can oversee projects taking place; including work that is done within the probation service.



9. Picture: Personal photo from my evening walking around the estate.

3. Birmingham



10. Picture: Birmingham- personal photo.

This visit took place from the 7th – 10th March 2022.

Birmingham is the major city that sits within the West Midlands. Since World-War II it has been considered the second capital of the UK with a population of 1,140,500 in the City alone.

West Midland's VRU strategic paperwork says their focus is on 5 key areas to support;

1. Communities and professionals to work together
2. Interventions to prevent violence
3. The use of evidence to inform decisions
4. Leaders to connect around a shared long-term ambition
5. Production of guidance, advice and toolkits

Birmingham itself has cultural and religious diversities to take into consideration, with some areas in the City recording a 70% Asian population from the most recent consensus (Birmingham City Council 2018). Since the beginning of 2022, there has been 73,772 violent and sexual offences recorded in Birmingham and it has an overall crime rate of 130 crimes per 1,000 people in the City.

After considerable delays in getting to Birmingham due to Covid-19, I finally arrived during the season change from winter to spring. I had booked myself a basic hotel just on the edge of the city centre with a view to being able to access central public transport after a short walk. Upon checking-in I became aware that the hotel was also being used to house refugees who were fleeing the conflict that has been happening in the Ukraine and beyond. I was shocked, initially, as the hotel was essentially their home, with the shared dining area becoming their socialisation space. This took some getting used to, especially during breakfast time in the morning!

Nevertheless, my first day was spent travelling to an area called Lozells (figure 11). This area is in the north of Birmingham, a 20-minute bus journey away, and is the area documented as having a 70% Asian population. I met, at a venue called the Lighthouse, with Jadiel who oversees the running of the centre which is a hub for all young people in the area. He gave me a tour of the facilities, which included their indoor sports hall, dance studio and music studio and he discussed the history of the purpose-built venue. Jadiel told me that since 2018 the Lighthouse has been supported by the VRU. During our conversation I picked up the following points about their relationship:

- The VRU opened the line of communication between the local authority and the organisation, avoiding the red tape that had previously damned any projects put forward.



11. Picture: Lozells in north Birmingham - personal photo

- The VRU enabled the organisation to try new methods of working, including a place-based approach, detached street workers and even introduced a mental well-being therapist on site for young people to engage with.
- The VRU allows the organisation to offer consistency to the young people in the services provided and to keep the local authority to task regarding future funding.
- The VRU can give them strategic insight into their local area through data deciphering.

After this discussion I was convinced that the working relationship and statutory responsibilities between the 3rd sector organisations and local authorities are being well upheld through strong links with the VRU.

In the afternoon I was able to participate in one of the Lighthouse's projects called *Step Together*, designed to facilitate the ease of school finishing time in the area (Picture 12 below). The idea is that workers will be at the gates of local high schools in the morning and afternoon when students are at their most vulnerable in terms of their emotional stability, association with negative peers and anti-social behaviour in the community and to support them on their route to and from home. It is hoped by being visible and engaged with the youth they will be less likely to engage in pro-criminal activities and be more aware of where support is if needed. This became apparent when one young person came out of school whom one of the workers knew. They appeared angry and distracted and reluctant to engage. The worker persevered and it became apparent the young person had been difficult in school and had been reprimanded and was upset about this. As we walked with the school children to a local area where they congregated, some of the young people were messing around with a trolley from a local supermarket, pushing each other along the street in this. Again, the outreach workers spoke with them and the individuals stopped their actions and dispersed, encouraging positive behaviours rather than trying to reprimand for negative.



12. Picture: *The Step Together team and I after doing the afternoon school walk - personal photo.*

My second day I went further out of the city to another borough called Marston Green located to Birmingham International Airport. I met with a community outreach worker called Alison who was based in the local police station. She told me her role was to link up statutory and non-statutory agencies via the VRU to promote working together. Alison was from Marston Green, and so was her family. As we drove to our first stop, she pointed out various locations in the area that held specific memories, or that were related to work and provided other various pieces of information. Most notable was her discussing her sister's passing; sadly, Alison's sister was murdered in a domestic

homicide which had rippled through the local community. This had a profound effect on Alison, her family and is main driver for why she does the work she does.

We went to a local pupil referral unit (PRU) and met with the head teacher. The point of the police officers (who were in plain clothes) and the outreach worker attending was to build links into services for young people that attend at the PRU. The conversation soon focused on a young person who kept attending the PRU with a hat on, and when asked to remove this became agitated and aggressive. The head teacher, police officers and outreach worker knew this young person and his family. Between them they ascertained that, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many of the young people had been unable to have their hair cut, and that despite the restrictions being lifted, many were still coming into school without a 'clean cut'. The team quickly decided that they would ask the local mobile barbers, who worked out of a converted ice cream van, to come park near the school to allow pupils who required a haircut to have one free of charge. They hoped that this would reduce the pressure on the young person of coming into the PRU with his hat on and the conflict that arose when asked to take it off.

It was at this point we had a frank conversation about the role of the Probation Service and police, discussing how policing has changed to a more community-based effort. Indeed, during this conversation at the police station, the chief inspector of the station stopped by and was keen to join in the conversation about VRUs, probation and community policing. He was very encouraging about the introduction of VRUs and suggested that they have taken a significant pressure off policing due to their efforts in intervention. I considered these points about how early intervention is crucial to long term benefits in terms of communities and violence reduction and positive policing.

My final day was spent with Zeba Choudary and Tony Eustace, hosting a team meeting with the Resettlement Team as part of the VRU. This is a collection of statutory and non-statutory organisations who come together with the VRU every month to discuss funding, and the interventions they can offer for those who are coming out of custody and resettling in the communities across the West-Midlands. It was also a wider opportunity for these agencies to discuss any barriers to their services and to liaise with each other. Watching this interaction was interesting as many agencies were not aware of the types of services being run in their local area and were encouraged to link in with each other. However, what was disappointing to note was the lack of probation involvement with this, as they were not part of this meeting. This settled in my mind that the role of probation has generally not been considered with the introduction in some of our national of VRUs.

7. Conclusion

“... we cannot rely only on concepts of justice to achieve change among those involved in violent offences”

(Moore 1995)

During my experiences of this scholarship, I have been able to speak to some inspirational people and see some positive and exciting work being undertaken in local communities. The passion and drive shown by the staff, volunteers and service users, and their belief in change, strikes me as representing some of the core values in public health - ‘the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organized efforts of society, (Acheson in Nutbeam 1998). However, the complexities and bureaucracy that intertwines with these efforts is often confusing and it is difficult to demonstrate tangible, immediate results and evidence success when much of the work is holistic and aimed at improving a well-being affect; how do you quantify a feeling? This is coupled with the almost ‘hypothetical’ existence of a VRU; where does the Probation Service fit within this and what is their contribution?

My understanding of a VRU in practice has been broadened. I have concluded that VRUs are essentially commissioning services, which are flexible and able to respond to emerging needs in their local areas by offering interventions through context specific services driven by data sets and by local knowledge. Often these are provided via third sector organisations who are specialised in their locality and in their area of expertise e.g., housing, education, employment. VRUs are often acting as the bridge between statutory agencies and third sector organisations. They help these stakeholders knit together to create a local authority wide support network that provides those who may be involved in, or at risk of entering, the criminal justice system with opportunities to divert by arranging housing, employment and social support. I also feel that the traditional responsibility shifting between organisations, statutory or non-statutory, becomes less terse, allowing for positive co-working to take place with a shared common goal.

The Probation Service has long been understood as an end-of-line service, that the moment for early intervention or disruption has been passed and they are simply the statutory service for monitoring and enforcement in the community. Indeed, the government’s own definition of the Probation Service as “... a statutory criminal justice service that supervises high-risk offenders released into the community” shows a lack of understanding and acknowledgment of the more complex intervention, support and preventative work that they engage in (UK Government 2022). The Probation Service’s roots are in the support of individuals in the community to prevent re-offending.

Not only this, but the information and knowledge the Service holds on those involved in violent offending and their families is untapped in potentially mapping how violence seeps within families and through communities. This is due to the unwavering dedication the Service has in trying to understand how to prevent repeat offending and the need to undertake safeguarding checks with the family unit. There are clear opportunities for disruption of generational offending in younger people with every contact a person on probation has with a probation officer.

It is important to also note that when VRUs came into existence in Scotland, they did not have a statutory organisation like the Probation Service to take into consideration. Their management of offenders is done through adult social services and therefore the responsibilities and involvement of those agencies within their introduction of VRUs will differ. A conclusion could therefore be drawn that consideration would not have been given to how an agency such as the Probation Service could or would work within a VRU; that is, what their responsibilities or key areas of contribution might be.

Although most of the focus in the documentation I have read points to VRUs needing to engage 'youths' in their effort to prevent violent crime, it appears that the definition of a young person is now those aged 25 and under. If this is the case, and all VRUs are acting in the way outlined in their strategic paperwork, then all statutory agencies involved with people aged 25 and under should sit at the table in strategic discussions. If probation is left out of these discussions and decision making, there is a risk of poorer information sharing, poorer relationships with their own clients, and reduced knowledge of what is happening in their local community.

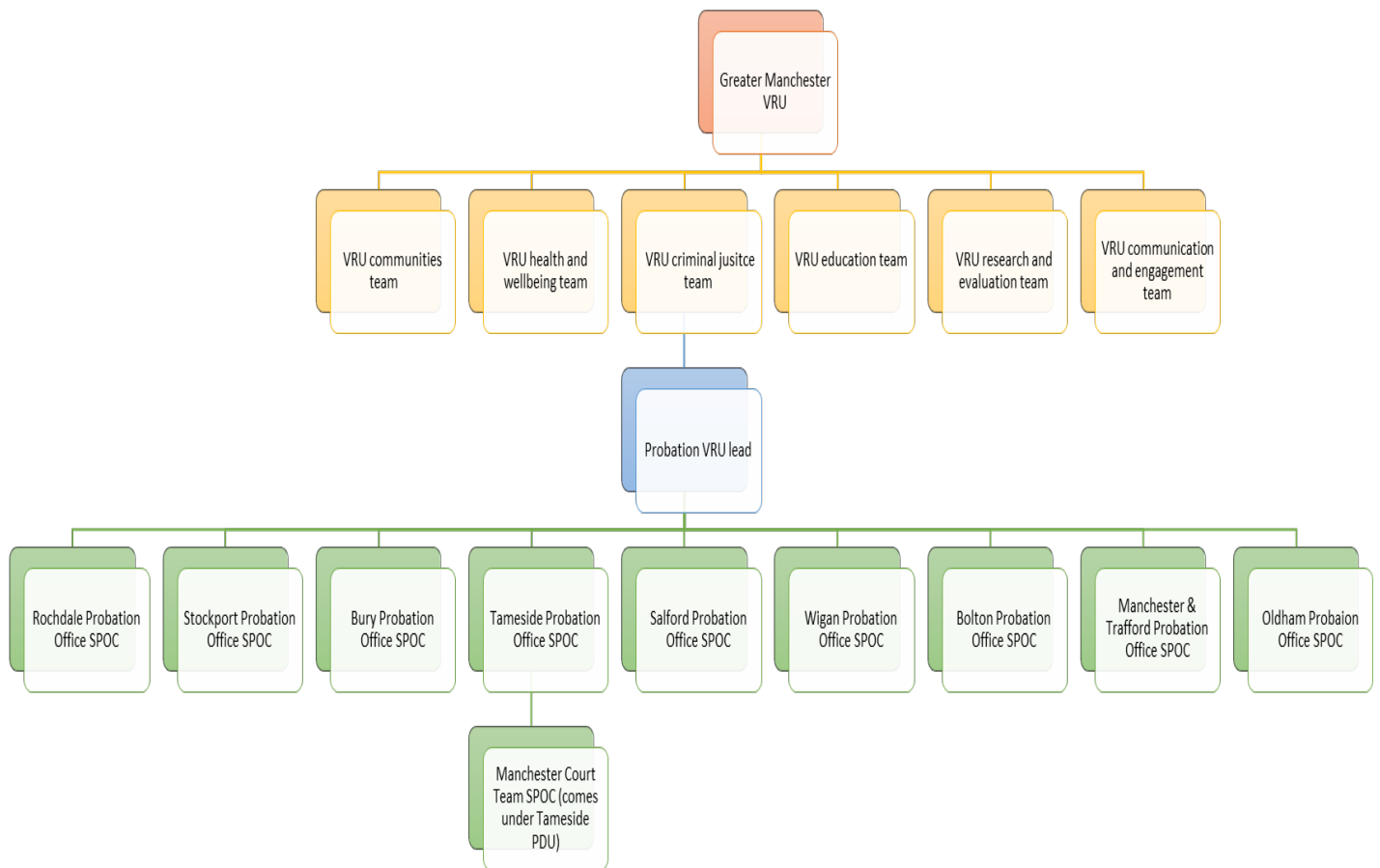
There is also real concern by those who are working with and within the VRUs that they may disband or not develop into something helpful in their current form. There has been much criticism about the lack of government support VRUs have been given in terms of finance and the timeframes in which to produce results and therefore the pressures on the government and those commissioning the services to prove their worth is immense. This links back to the earlier research around the role of 3rd sector organisations and their link with the criminal justice system; that history denotes that services only continue for as long as the funding is in place with little forward planning and implementation. For VRUs and the Probation Service to create healthy relationships, the funding and 'backroom' policies need to have their interaction at its core. This in turn may help promote 3rd sector organisations and other agencies' confidence that the VRU is there to stay.

To fully understand how things are done in Greater Manchester, I spent time involving myself with our VRU. GM VRU has clear input from professionals taking part in 6 delivery groups: communities, criminal justice, health and wellbeing, education, research and evaluation and communication and engagement. Designated leads from statutory agencies - such as the Probation Service, victims service, youth justice, public health and police - sit alongside non-statutory agency leads and researchers to form a co-working group dedicated to strategic planning of violence reduction in GM. It is unique in that, of the VRUs I have visited, this is the first with Probation Service involvement at this level, which puts the knowledge from my visits in a position where we might consider experimenting with a new way of working.

Based on my experiences and documentation analysis, I have developed, below (figure 13), what I see as a possible best practice model which could be replicated within all VRUs across England, and all probation offices in the relevant Local Authority areas. This model suggests the development of localised 'special points of contacts' (SPOCs) within each probation office to feed into a strategic member of the Probation Service who sits within the VRU (who could be called the 'probation lead'). This line of communication would allow practitioners who are 'in the field' a direct link to the high-level decision making within the VRUs, to influence the direction of funding, and become more aware of and linked to services in their local community. This approach means that probation is present as an early intervention service with intelligence and practical strategies to share.

Many things need to be considered here, especially ensuring buy-in from appropriate senior leaders and that adequate systems of governance are in place. Funding arrangements and adequate budgets need to be considered as not all VRUs are currently working closely with the Probation

Service. However, in Greater Manchester Probation Service, this model could easily be trialled, as there is a seconded member of the PS within the VRU. There is the opportunity now that VRUs and their implementation are in their 3rd year of development for best practice and professional relationships to be made with the Probation Service.



13. Figure: Best Practice Model

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