

Virtual volunteers – solution-oriented policing

An online engagement platform to increase the number and diversity of volunteers who assist the police.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Organisational
Topic	Community engagement Neighbourhood crime Productivity
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Region	Wales
Partners	Police Education
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.

Key details

Start date	May 2023
Scale of initiative	Wales
Target group	Adults Children and young people Communities Families General public Offenders Victims Workforce

Aim

To increase the number and diversity of police volunteers through an online engagement platform.

Intended outcome

- Increased number of volunteers.
- Increased hours of volunteering.
- Solutions offered to address policing problems.
- Increased number of police forces engaged with.
- Increased number of online platforms created to provide virtual volunteering.
- Increased trust and confidence in the police.

Description

The police value the many contributions made by volunteers, from special constables undertaking uniformed patrol to police support volunteers offering specialist advice on crypto-currency wallets.

However, restrictions imposed upon the recruitment of volunteers – most notably through the requirements of vetting – limit opportunities for individuals to support the police. (For example,

people with past criminal convictions or who are less physically able).

In Wales, police volunteering is being re-imagined under a virtual volunteering programme. The programme creates an online environment where thousands of individuals can engage in seeking a solution to policing problems. The initial partners in the programme are:

- the South Wales Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU) – named Tarian
- the University of South Wales
- the all-Wales citizens in policing coordinator

The University of South Wales, through the department supporting student work placements, developed a site within their intranet. This is named and branded as originating from Tarian. The site provides several modules that students can visit and complete. The system tracks the nature of the students' engagement, their completion of the modules and hours taken. The Tarian site provides an initial overview of the ROCU in the form of a video presentation from a detective chief inspector (DCI). The site then invites the students to seek solutions to several policing problems.

Example policing problem on the Tarian site

The first such problem relates to money mules. Tarian faced a dilemma in creating effective preventative messaging for university students from overseas who were identified as being vulnerable to being influenced or coerced into allowing organised crime groups to have access to their UK bank accounts. Money mules, and sometimes family members, faced threats and incidents of violence. Traditional policing approaches such as providing advisory leaflets or lectures were found to be ineffective.

The modules within the Tarian site focus on this problem and provide students with background information using YouTube videos and case studies.

The modules then pose several questions to the students, which they are invited to provide an answer for. The module is not prescriptive in terms of the form such an answer should take, and students are encouraged to be as innovative as they feel is appropriate.

As the university intranet is available to every member of academic staff and student, the modules and problems are structured to engage many different disciplines – for example psychology, criminology, childhood studies, computer science, and accountancy. In doing so, it is planned the

suggested answers will be as informed as possible.

Engagement with Tarian is provided through a generic police e-mail address. It's planned that students who complete the entire money mule programme and provide an answer will receive an e-letter of recognition from the detective chief inspector. Based on initial feedback from academic staff, the site is expected to receive considerable attention from students. This will generate several proposed solutions, from papers to TikTok-style videos. Tarian is now planning to host a day of presentations at the university to determine the most effective prevent message and choose which it will use.

Further policing problems are now being developed and it is expected the next will be related to e-sports.

Further sites are in development for each of the four Welsh police forces to complement the one now available to students from the Tarian site. The next phase of the virtual volunteers programme is to create similar sites within individual police force websites.

Programme principles

It's important to note the overarching principles built into the virtual volunteers programme.

It's not simply designed as a form of consultation. It's specifically intended to address the many real issues and problems faced by the police. It does this by providing an opportunity for creating public engagement, reassurance and confidence in the police. Through raising the problems and difficulties faced by the police with potentially thousands of individuals, it is hoped they will reach a greater level of understanding.

In summary, virtual volunteering is a solution that is in operation now in Wales and one that is looking to support policing problems.

Evaluation

- A [Live brief project report - the police virtual volunteers](#) was published in 2024 by the University of South Wales. The report identified potential success indicators including increased involvement and engagement with the police, solutions which would ultimately lead to a reduction in fear of crime and opportunities for learning and skills development for students and graduates.

- A [Virtual volunteering, pilot phase evaluation, first report](#) was published in 2024 by Community Safety Volunteering Global Foundation. The evaluation focuses on a student volunteering context, with the initial pilot phase partners in the programme being the South Wales Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU), named Tarian, identifying issues that have then been engaged by students and staff at the University of South Wales. Topics focused upon have included AI-enabled crime, money mules and money laundering, and romance fraud, all areas selected by Tarian because they reflect key priorities for the ROCU.
- An MSc thesis called [Investigating the motivations and barriers to engagement with the virtual volunteers programme](#) written in 2024 has looked into the motivations and barriers to engagement with the virtual volunteers programme at the University of South Wales.
- [Virtual Volunteers: a solution looking for policing problems](#) was published as an operational commentary of the virtual volunteers initiative.

Overall impact

Initial feedback from academic staff about virtual volunteers has been positive.

A planned evaluation will help determine the impact of virtual volunteers to date.

Learning

The use of the Tarian site has been supported through active marketing by the University of South Wales. The university actively markets employment and volunteering opportunities for students using a variety of media sources, for example screens in refreshment areas and the university intranet.

In this specific case, a number of academic departments have included the Tarian ‘problem’ as part of modules – for example, forensic accounting and psychology. This approach has resulted in students completing the volunteering activity.

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Tags

Community engagement Crime reduction Operational policing Police recruitment