

Listening circles

To provide a safe environment for women and girls from seldom heard groups to talk about their lived experiences.

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Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Organisational
Topic	Community engagement Diversity and inclusion Ethics and values Leadership, development and learning Operational policing Organisation including workforce Violence against women and girls Vulnerability and safeguarding
Organisation	Bedfordshire Police
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Region	South East

Key details

Partners	Police Education Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of practice	The practice is at a pilot stage.
Start date	May 2022
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Communities Families Victims Workforce

Aim

The aim of the initiative is to:

- build trust and confidence in the police from women and girls from every community
- create a safe environment for women and girls to open up about their lived experiences
- help establish voices for women and girls from seldom heard groups and who do not have English as their first language
- listen and learn

Intended outcome

- Increased engagement with the police from women and girls from seldom heard groups.
- Increased trust and confidence in the police from women and girls from seldom heard groups.
- Increased safety for women and girls.

Description

Through community relationship building, Bedfordshire Police identified the need to provide a safe environment to listen and understand the lived experiences of women about male violence against women and girls (MVAWG) in Bedfordshire.

The force have teamed up with Women of Colour in Policing (WoCiP) and a local community group called NINE RED Presents to run monthly Listening Circles. The local council are also involved and have put the force in contact with other local organisations and charities such as Women's Refuge Centres. These Listening Circles are held for women and girls who are Black, Brown, Asian, dual-heritage, or who have otherwise been termed as 'ethnic minorities'.

The Circles aim for women and girls to share their concerns, issues and needs around MVAWG. An invited guest speaker (for example a survivor of domestic abuse) is present to guide, support or help the group.

Listening Circles are made up of five sub-circles. Each circle has its own unique identity and functions to serve the needs of its participants. By ensuring that each circle has their specific needs met, the idea is that the collective core has more power to speak on behalf of the whole (as well as other individual) groups. Themes incorporated within the Circles have included:

- police engagement policy for black female victims of domestic/sexual abuse/violence
- impact of stop and search
- the pre-arrest diversion project for all women and girls unnecessarily entering the criminal justice system resulting in No Further Action because they are stealing necessities or other petty crimes.
- needs of participants and complexity of systems.
- police referrals to grassroots organisations
- sexual racism
- sexism and racism
- funding streams and their criteria and priorities

The circles have about fifteen attendees (although attendance can vary) and they operate through word of mouth promotion. They are held in hubs within the local community. 'Chatham House' rules are operational for the circles and there is an attendee from a local Women's Services organisation if attendees wish to have follow up support.

A Detective Chief Superintendent from Bedfordshire Police attends the circles and feeds back any follow up actions to the force. The wider role of the police in the circles is to take minutes, create an agenda and ask for feedback which can be actioned. Since participating in the Listening Circles, some women some have become involved in police scrutiny panels and multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) panels.

Overall impact

One listening circle led to a review of Bedfordshire's domestic abuse policies. This review sought to ensure all policies catered for the individual needs of females who may be further prejudiced by policies, and their potential conflict on the culture of Black and minority ethnic victims.

Listening Circles have helped the force to listen and learn, support others, build relationships and ultimately build trust and confidence.

Women of Colour in Policing (WoCiP) was named inclusion and diversity initiative of the year at the national 2022 [Inspire Justice Awards](#).

Learning

It is essential to lead the circles with a respectful approach to community collaboration work.

Leaders of the circles must ensure the participants feel safe to be open and honest. This is where 'Chatham House' rules are so important.

Force senior leader buy-in and engagement is crucial to the circles running successfully.

The circles should be attended by someone in force with influence. Force attendees should also have experience dealing with trauma.

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