

Project Vigilant – preventing sexual violence

Project Vigilant aims to prevent sexual violence by targeting predatory behaviour in the night-time economy.

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Key details

Does it work?	Smarter practice
Focus	Prevention
Topic	Violence against women and girls
Organisation	Thames Valley Police
Region	London
Target group	Communities

Smarter practice

Overview

Project Vigilant aims to prevent sexual violence by targeting predatory behaviour in the night-time economy. Thames Valley Police uses bespoke behavioural observation training to upskill frontline officers in risk management and to encourage proactivity in spotting predatory behaviour. Once trained, plain-clothed officers are deployed into the night-time economy to identify predatory sexual behaviour. Uniformed officers intervene to prevent this behaviour escalating into an offence.

Problem

In 2019, Oxford saw a 43% increase in serious sexual offending, including multiple stranger rapes. Conventional night-time economy patrols were carried out to reduce sexual offending and provide public reassurance. However, perpetrators simply dispersed to other places or changed their behaviours after seeing uniformed police presence.

This increase in sexual offending coincided with a series of sexually motivated ‘creeper’ burglaries, whereby an offender, labelled ‘the prowler’, hung around night-time economy spaces searching for victims. Thames Valley Police suspected that ‘the prowler’ identified his targets as they walked home from Oxford. It was unknown whether the recent rise in stranger rapes was linked to ‘the prowler’.

Thames Valley Police conducted proactive patrols to identify ‘the prowler’. This involved covertly patrolling public spaces in the night-time economy. Within a few weeks, ‘the prowler’ was identified but another problem had been uncovered, as 41 men had been observed targeting women in a predatory fashion. Behaviours including cat-calling, lewd sexual comments, touching, stalking and harassment were witnessed by officers. Each of the men were stopped and their details were taken. Of the 41 men stopped, 19 were known for sexual offending.

Response

Thames Valley Police sought to professionalise the operation that led to the identification of both ‘the prowler’ and wider predatory behaviour within the night-time economy. The force trained a group of officers to follow the same operational protocols that uncovered this predatory activity. Using these trained officers, patrols were introduced that followed the same method of deploying plain-clothed, surveillance-trained officers alongside their uniformed colleagues. The plain-clothed officers would patrol hotspot areas to identify predatory behaviour (as specified by a psychologist attached to the National Crime Agency). The plain-clothed officers would then ask uniformed officers to intervene as soon as potentially predatory behaviour was identified.

This operation in Oxford was subsequently adopted across all areas with a substantial night-time economy in Thames Valley. The operation became known as Project Vigilant. Project Vigilant aims to prevent sexual violence in the night-time economy through a perpetrator-focused approach, targeting those who prey on vulnerable people.

An important component of Project Vigilant is the development of a bespoke behavioural observation workshop. It is mandatory for officers to attend this workshop before taking part in

Project Vigilant deployments. The workshop upskills frontline officers in risk management and focuses on how to develop proactive behavioural observation skills.

Logic model

Problem Increased sexual violence in the night-time economy.

Behavioural observation training

- the theory of sexual offending behaviours
- conducting plain-clothed proactive policing patrols within the confines of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) and section 78 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE)

Operational protocols

Response

- minimum standards for adopting Project Vigilant

Risk management processes

- sharing identified risk with other police forces
- flagging higher-risk subjects on the Police National Computer
- developing a support pathway for those identified as displaying predatory behaviour

Number of frontline officers upskilled in spotting predatory behaviour and in proactive policing methodology.

Outputs

Number of individuals identified committing predatory behaviour and under risk management protocols.

Intelligence gathered on the depth and scale of predatory offending in the night-time economy.

	Reduction in sexual offences in the night-time economy.
Intended outcomes	Increased trust and confidence in the police by consumers of the night-time economy.
	Smarter, intelligence-led working practices to support the Thames Valley Police violence against women and girls strategy.

Implementation

How Project Vigilant works

Project Vigilant deployments involve both uniformed and plain-clothed officers trained in behavioural observation skills through Thames Valley Police's bespoke workshop.

The trained officers conduct Project Vigilant patrols either as business as usual or on a voluntary overtime basis. The patrols occur within four of the main night-time economies of Thames Valley Police. The deployments are planned using a red, amber, green (RAG) status:

- red = freshers' week, planned events, holiday celebrations
- amber = end of the month, intelligence-led deployments
- green = usual business

The plain-clothed officers patrol designated areas, such as outside of clubs and bars. The patrols occur at specific days and times identified as being the highest risk for sexual offences (this is typically Friday and Saturday nights or student nights). Project Vigilant patrols have also been extended to cover large-scale public events, including those held at the National Bowl in Milton Keynes, Reading Festival, Ascot races and Truckfest.

On a Project Vigilant patrol, plain-clothed officers seek to identify potentially predatory behaviour. Such behaviour may include individuals following, leering at or harassing others. Once the predatory behaviour has been identified, the plain-clothed officers communicate with their uniformed colleagues, who then directly intervene. Plain-clothed officers do not approach members of the public unless there is an immediate risk of harm.

The uniformed officers on a Project Vigilant deployment have several elements to their role. These include:

- engaging with members of public, including offering support to those identified as vulnerable
- engaging and interacting with potential perpetrators
- being available to respond to plain-clothed colleagues
- patrolling designated areas
- using powers (where appropriate) such as arrest or stop and search

The uniformed officers always wear body-worn video cameras to record their interactions on Project Vigilant deployments. The officers are also required to submit an intelligence report for every individual they stop. The intelligence reports record significant information regarding the circumstances surrounding the stop and the individual involved. The report will also include an account from the stopped individual.

There are two main features that underpin Project Vigilant deployments. The first is the use of operational protocols to identify sexual predatory behaviours. The second is risk management processes to manage those displaying the behaviours. Officers involved in Project Vigilant are trained in these protocols and processes through Thames Valley Police's behavioural observation workshop.

Project Vigilant seeks to achieve several outcomes. These are to:

- understand the depth and scale of predatory offending in the night-time economy and public spaces
- target and disrupt those who demonstrate predatory behaviours in public spaces – prior to an offence being committed
- apply risk management protocols to those who have been identified through their predatory activities
- upskill frontline officers in spotting predatory behaviour and in proactive policing methodology
- gather data to support an evidence-based policing approach
- support the Thames Valley Police violence against women and girls strategy

The bespoke training and experience gained during Project Vigilant deployments have helped Thames Valley Police in several ways. They have started to encourage a culture change, shifting the emphasis of addressing violence against women and girls from a victim-focused to a perpetrator-focused approach. The training and deployments have also positively influenced police practice by encouraging officers to engage more proactively with the public.

Finally, Project Vigilant provides the force with intelligence-led learning. Intelligence gained from targeting, arresting and deterring offenders can be analysed to understand important details such as prolific offenders, places, times and modus operandi. The ultimate objective is for this intelligence-led learning to assist Thames Valley Police with focusing priorities, improving targeting and achieving smarter working. All these outcomes are anticipated to encourage greater trust and confidence in the police.

Behavioural observation training

Thames Valley Police have created their own workshop for officers involved in Project Vigilant. This training was developed with advice and guidance from key stakeholders and policing peers. Crucially, the training includes:

- the theory of sexual offending behaviours
- conducting plain-clothed proactive policing patrols within the confines of the [Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 \(RIPA\)](#) and [section 78 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 \(PACE\)](#)

The Thames Valley Police training is a one-day workshop. The training develops officer behavioural detection skills and heavily focuses on the practical application of proactive policing. The significant objectives of the workshop are to improve and encourage:

- understanding of proactive policing
- confidence in applying proactive policing
- proactive engagement with the public
- awareness about predatory behaviour

Prior to developing their in-house workshop, Thames Valley Police sought the support of an organisation called [Profile Aware](#). Profile Aware provides a behavioural detection course accredited by the International Association of Behaviour Detection and Analysis (IABDA). This course was adapted for the night-time economy and also to reflect Project Vigilant's distinct operational protocols.

Thames Valley Police have started to run train the trainer sessions for other forces looking to implement Project Vigilant.

Operational protocols

Thames Valley Police have established a series of minimum standards which they ask all forces to adhere to if they wish to adopt Project Vigilant branding. These minimum standards are:

- forces should conduct regular Project Vigilant deployments to prevent sexual violence in the night-time economy
- all deployments must be overseen by a supervising officer. This officer must be at least the rank of sergeant (or a suitable detective constable) to ensure close scrutiny of deployments and sufficient support for staff
- all officers conducting the Project Vigilant operation are to be fully briefed. Officers must be reminded of the sensitivities around plain-clothed deployments and their obligations around submitting intelligence
- plain-clothed officers must be supported by a uniformed intervention team. Under no circumstances should plain-clothed officers be operating alone or without support
- all plain-clothed officers must have received appropriate behavioural observation training prior to conducting a Project Vigilant patrol
- to ensure transparency, uniformed officers are to activate their body-worn video cameras when dealing with members of the public
- there must be risk management processes in place to manage those displaying predatory behaviour. Officers must also complete any necessary safeguarding post-deployment
- a communications plan should be in place to provide regular updates on Project Vigilant, these updates should not be confused with initiatives addressing vulnerability
- all external communications must be perpetrator-focused and should not suggest any behavioural changes for potential victims
- forces should consult local partner agencies and survivors of sexual violence to ensure that the Project Vigilant concept and aims are shared (this consultation will ensure that the local community are able to raise concerns and ask questions)
- forces should have a mechanism in place to continuously monitor the effect on the community, the disproportionality of those stopped, and public sentiment
- Project Vigilant deployments should only occur in public spaces and there should not be patrols inside licensed premises (officers deployed in a plain-clothed capacity are not acting as undercover officers or surveillance officers and entering premises to watch patrons may blur the line between observing and undertaking surveillance)

Risk management processes

Alongside the behavioural observation training and wider operational protocols, risk management processes are a significant component of Project Vigilant. The risk management processes conducted by Thames Valley Police include the following.

- Sharing identified risk with other local police areas and forces.
- Flagging higher-risk subjects on the Police National Computer.
- Developing a support pathway in partnership with Circles South East (a charity that works with convicted sex offenders). This pathway enables individuals identified as displaying predatory behaviour to be referred to a bespoke intervention programme to address their behaviour.

Project Vigilant risk management processes help to ensure the continuing risk management of individuals identified as demonstrating predatory sexual behaviours. They also make sure that any necessary safeguarding is conducted post-deployment.

Enablers for implementation

The rollout of Project Vigilant across Thames Valley has been supported by several factors. These include access to funding, collaborative partnership working and a supportive organisational culture.

Access to funding

Thames Valley Police successfully bid for two rounds of government funding to support Project Vigilant. An initial Home Office grant of £90,000 enabled the force to appoint a dedicated detective sergeant to develop Project Vigilant operationally and support the force tactical lead. This funding also enabled Thames Valley Police to work alongside the University of Brighton on an [academic evaluation of Project Vigilant](#).

A second funding allocation of £297,000 enabled all Project Vigilant deployments up until April 2022 to be funded by the government's Safety of Women at Night (SWaN) fund. This second grant also funded nearly 100 officers to undergo behavioural observation training.

Partnership working

Thames Valley Police has found that engagement with community partners (such as security staff, taxi marshals and street pastors) has helped support their deployments. In particular, partnership working is considered significant to increasing public confidence and trust in the police through

Project Vigilant.

The collaboration between Thames Valley Police and Circles South East has enabled the force to address sexualised predatory behaviour in the longer-term. The collaboration has enabled individuals displaying predatory behaviour to access voluntary referrals to a behavioural pathway. This relationship has also helped the force to cement Project Vigilant risk management and safeguarding processes.

Organisational culture

There is senior leadership buy-in and support for Project Vigilant across Thames Valley Police. This buy-in is needed, as each Project Vigilant deployment costs the force approximately £2,000.

Organisational support for Project Vigilant has been demonstrated through the following.

- Detective superintendents jointly leading the behavioural observation training.
- The recruitment of a dedicated intelligence development officer (IDO) for Project Vigilant. The IDO was recruited as part of the recommendations set out by the academic evaluation conducted by the University of Brighton. The IDO is responsible for collating all relevant debrief forms, quality assuring intelligence submissions and working closely with force intelligence to ensure that perpetrator risk is appropriately assessed.

Outcomes and impact

The University of Brighton conducted an initial evaluation of Project Vigilant. The researchers suggested that there was not enough data to draw conclusions about differences in police-recorded sexual offences in the night-time economy since Project Vigilant began. However, the results indicated that Project Vigilant officers were proactively intervening in situations where they suspected predatory sexual offending was developing (Magill and others, 2023).

A police-led evaluation of Project Vigilant is currently ongoing, which is being supported by the University of Cambridge. This second evaluation aims to:

- measure the behaviours of those identified by Project Vigilant who are already known to police for sexual offending (for example, through previous convictions or arrests for sexual offending), compared with those who have not previously come to police attention for sexual offending

- explore any common behavioural characteristics of those identified through Project Vigilant, plus any trends in identified commonality
- understand the effectiveness of the behavioural observation training in officer understanding of how to spot predatory behaviour

Learning and recommendations

Recommendations from the University of Brighton

The University of Brighton worked alongside Thames Valley Police to create implementation guidelines for Project Vigilant. The University of Brighton emphasises the following points for forces looking to implement Project Vigilant.

- At a minimum, Project Vigilant requires a force lead, a dedicated operational lead and analytical support, such as an IDO. As communications are an important feature of Project Vigilant, it is also strongly advised to include a local communications officer as a significant member of the implementation team from the outset.
- Forces should undertake a clear and early scoping exercise to identify officers who want to be involved in Project Vigilant. Information about Project Vigilant, including their role and how to get involved, should be clearly communicated.
- A Project Vigilant briefing document should be created for officers involved in deployments. The briefing document should outline the objectives and methodology of the operation. This document should also highlight the purpose of Project Vigilant and how it may help to reduce predatory sexual behaviour in the night-time economy.
- Patrols should involve at least one female officer to allay concerns of officer authenticity, especially given the plain-clothed element of patrols. Officers should always work in pairs.

Learnings from Thames Valley Police

Thames Valley Police emphasises the following points for forces looking to implement Project Vigilant.

- The benefits of collaborating with external parties to raise awareness about Project Vigilant. The force has found this approach to be particularly effective for raising awareness with younger audiences. For example, the force has partnered with a social media influencer to raise awareness via the influencer's channels. The force has also attended freshers' fairs at universities

across the Thames Valley. Additionally, the force has worked alongside BBC Crimewatch. The Crimewatch team went on a Project Vigilant deployment to film officers in action.

- The importance of recording Project Vigilant results. In particular, the force stresses the importance of recording the risk management of individuals who are stopped as part of a deployment, plus any necessary follow-up.

Thames Valley Police is actively seeking opportunities to obtain further learning from Project Vigilant. As part of this ethos, the force:

- has started to build a scrutiny panel with local independent advisory groups (IAGs) to obtain constructive feedback
- is seeking further opportunities to measure the effectiveness of the behavioural observation training
- is looking to capture the views and experiences of seldom-heard members of the local community
- is engaging with the positive action and engagement team within Thames Valley Police to help develop opportunities to successfully engage with seldom-heard communities and receive feedback

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