

Kent and Medway safer knife replacement scheme

A scheme where families with individuals at risk of committing knife-enabled violence are encouraged to swap their knives for safer rounded-end alternatives.

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Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Diversion Prevention Reoffending
Topic	Community engagement Offender management Violence (other) Violence against women and girls Violence including homicide Vulnerability and safeguarding
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Region	South East

Key details

Partners	Police Community safety partnership Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	October 2023
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Children and young people Communities Families Offenders Victims Women

Aim

The safer knife replacement scheme (SKRS) aims to:

- enable families to safely dispose of knives and replace them with safer, rounded-end alternatives
- support young people identified as being at-risk of knife carrying
- support households at risk of domestic abuse
- educate people on the safety benefits of rounded-end knives
- deliver a culture shift that discourages knife-carrying

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of SKRS are to:

- reduce knife-related serious violence
- increase community safety and trust
- increase awareness of the risks associated with knife possession
- reduce the possession of knives in public places

Description

SKRS was launched by the Kent and Medway Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) to reduce knife-related serious violence by enabling individuals to easily dispose of knives and replace them with safer, rounded-end alternatives.

The safer design knives have been tested in a controlled environment by a team at De Montfort University. The team found that the knives did not penetrate four fabric types when used in a stabbing motion, meaning they are less likely to cause harm than knives with traditional pointed tips.

To promote SKRS, packs of Viners Assure four-piece knife sets have been distributed to:

- Kent Police
- The Ben Kinsella Trust
- Office of the Kent Police and Crime Commissioner
- Clarion (a domestic abuse support service that provides refuge housing)

This allowed them to assess the rounded ends and overall quality of the knives before rolling out the scheme. Individual packs were also provided to the Home Secretary during their visit to Kent and supported living accommodations.

SKRS eligibility

Eligibility for the SKRS is based on the circumstances of the family home, young person and their family/guardian engagement. A family is deemed eligible if:

- the young person has been arrested for a weapon related offence or has intel suggesting they are carrying a weapon
- the young person has come to the attention of police in relation to drug dealing or young street group/gang involvement

- there are concerns about domestic harm and the SKRS can complement other support being provided.

Encouraging participation

This initiative will also see the SKRS being offered in addition to offence focused prevention-based interventions with families engaging with key workers, out of court disposals or statutory services.

The VRU have developed several strategies to encourage individuals to participate in the SKRS. This requires understanding the motivations, barriers, and effective messaging strategies that influence behaviour change. Strategies that have worked include:

- highlighting the risks of carrying knives, including legal consequences and personal safety concerns
- emphasising the benefits of exchanging knives for safer alternatives, such as reducing crime and protecting young people
- partnering with trusted community leaders, youth workers, and local organisations helps engage those who might be wary of authority figures
- providing additional services, such as self-defence classes or mentorship programmes
- collaboration with health services, schools, and local businesses strengthens outreach
- training packages for police and partnership collaboration
- distributing a parent/guardian leaflet. This is an A4 page explaining what the scheme is and what it's goals are, general safety and awareness advice around knives, as well as signposting to other support and resources

How the knife-swap works

Case workers within Kent County Council and Medway Council assess the case and contact the young person and carers/family to explain the SKRS intervention. Focus on promoting protective factors linked to the risk of carrying a knife or weapon is a key part of this discussion. This is a voluntary scheme, and families/guardians will have had to agree to take part before the knives within the home are surrendered and exchanged. If a family agrees to take part in the initiative, the case workers will record this on their case notes and contact their area VRU coordinator for facilitation of an exchange to take place.

Police and partner agencies will be able to offer the SKRS to eligible families and will provide them with a pack of four or a single five-inch rounded kitchen knife, alongside safety advice and guidance in exchange for replacing all the pointed knives within the property. Safety advice includes guidance such as:

- if in conflict remove yourself to a safe room with a potential barrier, do not run to the kitchen where there are potential weapons
- do not leave your knives on the draining board
- remove knife blocks from easy reach
- keep account of how many knives are in your home
- signposting of support to other organisations

Secure tubes with a QR code are provided by the VRU and a Microsoft form linked to the QR code must be completed before any exchange. The form includes a waiver for the participant and the following information:

- the number of knives surrendered
- reason for the knife swap
- agency submitting form
- date of knife swap
- participant name
- address and phone number

When a case worker attends the family address, they will take the surrendered knives and place them into the weapons tube and secure the tube by screwing the lid back on. If a young person or their parent/carer offers to surrender additional knives or weapons which fall into the category of offensive weapons, the worker should accept them and safely store them as per the recovery of knives and document this on case notes.

Once the surrendered knives have been safely stored in the knife tube the case worker will give the family the Viners Assure knife. The knives and any weapons surrendered will be transported and safely disposed of and marked for destruction at the local Police station. This scheme is to complement usual safety advice and guidance but does not replace it.

Protocol for case workers

The force has encouraged their partners to make the SKRS exchanges as the police are not the most suitable or available agency to carry out this work. As part of the instructions given to partner agencies, these directions are given:

- check all knives with a point are removed from the address otherwise what is the point of #pointless?
- when partners visit the property they are to use your usual visit protocols and any control measures would have been identified before visiting
- complete a personal health and safety risk assessment based on information the police hold regarding the household to decide whether it is safe to visit
- If the risk assessment identifies any matters which require additional control measures, such as family members who have previously shown aggression to officers/case workers then an appropriate worker will be allocated with the agreement of the family. This will be to attend the address and assist with the knife replacement
- Knives are to be made safe in a secure tube before handing over the assure knife and surrendered knives are to remain in this tube and taken to your local police station for destruction

Costs

240 sets of four-piece knife sets and 600 individual knives were purchased. The cost was:

- Viners Assure four-piece knife set: one costs £4.99, 240 costs £1,197.60
- Viners Assure five-inch utility knife: one costs £1.33, 600 costs £798.00
- in total: £1,995.60
- total plus VAT: £2,394.72

The tubes used to secure the knives are recycled from police property, there is no cost associated with them or the QR codes which are printed onto stickers. There is a small cost to the police for the destruction of the knives. There are no additional costs in terms of police or caseworker time as SKRS exchanges are carried out during the staff's day-to-day work.

Overall impact

344 knives have been removed during 71 swaps. This is a reduction of knives in homes and the community. This also led to engagement, mentoring and a greater awareness to the responsibility

to keep individuals safe. Most knives were swapped due to a 'young person situation' with 83.1%, followed by a 'domestic abuse situation' with 16.9%.

Referral family/professional feedback

Families and case workers were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the scheme when completing the waiver to consent to a knife exchange. There is a question on the Microsoft form which allows for free text feedback to be given.

Overall, their feedback was positive. Many individuals expressed their support and approval of the scheme, describing it as a good, great, or brilliant idea.

- community impact: several comments highlighted the positive impact on the community, including increased safety and reduced risk of violence
- personal engagement: people mentioned their willingness to engage with the scheme and appreciated the opportunity to participate
- safety and risk reduction: comments emphasised the importance of reducing access to sharp instruments to prevent violence and self-harm, particularly among young people
- youth and community programs: the scheme was adopted by youth hubs, community cooking clubs, and church kitchens, where it was seen as a method to promote safety and positive messaging
- domestic situations: some comments referred to the scheme's role in domestic settings, such as safeguarding children and managing household knives
- service quality: positive remarks about the quality of the service and the information provided

Learning

The SKRS has demonstrated positive results in its pilot phase. The SKRS has been well-received by both participants and professionals, with feedback highlighting its impact on community safety and the reduction of risks associated with knife possession.

Despite some barriers, such as limited support from certain agencies and the need for more comprehensive data collection, the scheme has successfully engaged with various community groups and individuals.

The establishment of a national working core group indicates the potential for broader implementation and collaboration across counties. Kent have led on creating a working core group with other Police areas to share best practice, overcome barriers and support each other to develop their own knife replacement schemes. Bimonthly meetings are currently in place which up to 20 forces have been attending to learn more about the scheme.

Another force previously attempted to deliver a similar scheme in their area, but it failed as it was announced in the press and received pushback from the public. Kent has taken a more subtle approach, with the pilot targeting those who need it most and gathering their feedback before expanding force-wide and announcing the scheme to the public. This ensures they have proof the scheme works and can refute critiques, allowing control of the narrative.

The youth endowment fund (YEF) have expressed interest in this scheme. Their data shows that 55% of knife related homicides are from kitchen knives and they believe rounded-end knives could reduce fatalities by over half. YEF are interested in supporting Kent with an evaluation of the scheme so that it can be rolled out nationally.

To enhance the evaluation and impact of the SKRS, future efforts should focus on obtaining consent for data use, tracking referral sources, and conducting follow-up surveys. These steps will provide a more robust understanding of the scheme's long-term effectiveness and inform potential expansions or adaptations. Currently, the force is planning to update the Microsoft form participants are asked to complete to collect more detailed feedback.

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