

Why language matters – raising awareness of the use of victim blaming language

Why language matters is an ongoing campaign within the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) to address the use of victim blaming language (VBL).

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Key details

Stage of practice	Evaluated locally
Purpose	Organisational
Topic	Ethics and values Leadership, development and learning Training and professional development
Organisation	Metropolitan Police Service
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Region	London
Partners	Police Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	August 2024

Key details

Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Children and young people Communities Disability General public Victims Women Workforce

Aim

The aim of language matters is to minimise the use of VBL across the MPS.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of language matters are to:

- reduce the use of VBL across the MPS through audited investigations
- improve victim satisfaction and engagement with the MPS
- improve victim and public trust and confidence
- ensure officers and staff across the MPS understand the impact that language can have on victims and investigations

Description

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) found that 55% of MPS missing person and public protection case files contained VBL, which placed the MPS in 'Engage' status. The audit identified the following widespread use of inappropriate language:

- "regular misper"
- "refuses to support police"

- “victim won’t leave the relationship”
- “associates with a gang”

A detective chief inspector was tasked with defining, standardising and eliminating VBL across the MPS within six months, prior to the HMICFRS reinspection. There was no cost involved; however, the initiative was supported by the existing cooperate and learning and development structures.

Initial diagnostic phase

MPS conducted force-wide focus groups across multiple basic command units (BCUs). These were face-to-face sessions, with 10-15 individuals from emergency response teams as well as missing person investigators at supervisory and constable levels. The aim of the sessions was to understand the use of VBL and the root cause.

The detective chief inspector also conducted a literature search of guidance within the last two years and found the following:

- independent office for police conduct (IOPC) ending victim blaming in the context of violence against women and girls
- the Children’s Society appropriate language in relation to child exploitation
- Solihull safeguarding adults board guidance

The literature revealed that guidance was predominantly related to specific crime types, therefore the detective chief inspector identified a need to produce guidance tailored to all contexts of crimes and victims.

Key findings

The focus groups revealed that officers and staff were largely unaware that commonly used phrases constituted as VBL. For officers and staff there was no standard guidance to refer to and there was a lack of understanding of alternatives or the impact of language commonly used terms.

An internal audit conducted by the dedicated inspection team (DIT) revealed that the use of VBL was strongly correlated with inappropriate risk grading and inadequate investigation quality.

Actions taken

The detective chief inspector formed a multi-agency reference group which included representation from:

- Victim Support Charity
- Missing.org
- Children's Society
- MPS VAWG team
- MPS Operation Soteria lead
- MPS DIT auditors
- MPS behavioural scientists

The group created the MPS guidance on VBL. The document included:

- a clear definition of VBL and why it is harmful
- real-life case studies demonstrating negative investigative impact
- a trauma-informed framework explaining how victims' behaviours are shaped by coercion, fear, and survival strategies
- instructions on neutral, active voice language that correctly attributes agency to perpetrators
- advice on how to challenge or educate colleagues constructively
- a glossary of common VBL terms with suggested alternatives
- practical examples and decision-making tools for officers and supervisors

Launch of why language matters

The initiative was rebranded from VBL to why language matters, which was fully rolled out and promoted across force using the following methods:

- the detective chief inspector wrote an internal blog to prompt discussions across force about the use of VBL and promote the why language matters document
- an internal communication campaign was developed and deployed which included posters, desk aides and intranet articles reinforcing key messages
- the detective chief inspector held strategic briefings with BCUs to ensure local leadership support and dissemination to their teams
- a supervisor guide was created on how to identify, respond to and educate around VBL

- face-to-face training has been delivered to over 20,000 officers and 6,000 supervisors which was coordinated by the MPS learning and development team. The training covered:
 - why VBL occurs
 - why VBL matters (using victim experiences to emphasise)
 - what VBL is and alternatives to use
 - how to challenge and educate when you see or read VBL

VBL inputs have become a permanent fixture with the following training programmes:

- recruitment
- domestic abuse
- rape and serious sexual offences
- child exploitation
- missing persons
- specialist child abuse investigators development programme
- hydra training
- DIT have conducted investigation audits to assess whether there is an awareness of VBL and to ensure there are feedback loops to officers and supervisors
- why language matters has been integrated into the structural governance of daily meetings to ensure constructive challenge, learning and enabling a learning by example ethos
- why language matters has been supported by an E-learning package developed Netex Learning and the learning and development team. This E-learning builds on the in-person training and provides more detail on why using victim blaming or problematic language is an issue, the impact it has on victim/survivors, principles to avoid using it and how to challenge

Overall impact

Since July 2024, the DIT have been assessing:

- whether teams such as child exploitation, domestic abuse and missing persons are following the guidance
- what the risk assessment, safeguarding measures and investigation consisted of, and
- whether VBL was present

The DIT then identify any learning opportunities which is then fed back to supervisors.

The initiative has delivered clear, measurable improvements towards reducing VBL across against the MPS and preventing harm and poor investigations caused by inappropriate language.

Impact on the organisation

- VBL usage in audited case files reduced from 55% to 15%
- HMICFRS recognised and praised the work during their reinspection, and the MPS was formally removed from 'Engage' status
- there has been sustained cultural change through integration in core processes, including training, local governance and grip processes, and promotions
- language change is now linked directly to improved risk assessments and investigative responses, particularly for vulnerable missing persons and those at risk of exploitation
- victims are now more likely to receive an appropriate and empathetic service due to improved officer awareness and behaviour

Wider sector influence

- the guidance has been shared with and adopted by West Midlands Police ahead of their HMICFRS inspection
- several local authorities have contacted the MPS for support in adopting the approach to VBL in their own contexts
- officers now have a greater understanding of the link between language and justice outcomes
- supervisors have the confidence, competence and tools to identify, advise and constructively challenge VBL

Learning

- Framing matters – initially the initiative was called VBL, however this prompted feedback from officers that it implied deliberate blame. The rebranding to Why Language Matters ensured that VBL was more accessible and focused attention on impact, not blame. This shift helped open the conversation and reduce resistance.
- Not all “factual” language is neutral – phrases such as “refuses to engage” or “regular misper” were often previously used without the understanding the impact of the language used. These terms can downplay risk or suggest victim culpability, and they tend to be copied across records

without question. The force learnt that language in initial reports sets the tone for how cases are supervised, risk-assessed, and progressed.

- Using practical VBL tools as well as theory – it was not enough to tell the workforce what not to say. They needed clear alternatives, context, and examples. It was essential to provide the workforce with the tools to understand the impact of their language.
- The shift from punitive ‘challenge’ to educational, supportive interventions was key – when supervisors used a direct, corrective tone, it often led to pushback. However, when they coached, explained, and offered better ways of phrasing things, officers responded well. This supportive model-built trust, encouraged reflection, and helped embed long-term behavioural change.
- Resistance is natural – some of the workforce saw this as irrelevant to frontline policing or dismissed it as political correctness. Instead of pushing harder to enforce the initiative, the force listened. This helped to shift the debate and find common ground.
- Leadership is essential for cultural change – when BCU commanders and senior leads actively supported the work and modelled the behaviour themselves, it gave supervisors and frontline staff the confidence to do the same.
- Language directly influences outcomes – audits showed that reports containing problematic language were more likely to be poorly graded, inadequately supervised and under-investigated. Language affected how victims were perceived and how seriously cases were taken. By changing the language, the force have changed their response.
- Embedding changes to language – to be successful the Why Language Matters campaign will continue to run and be promoted within force. The force have embedded the work into new recruit training, specialist courses, promotion assessments, and operational meetings. The force have introduced audits and feedback loops to keep momentum and track impact.

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