

Multi-agency case management: evidence and orthodoxy

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Policing is increasingly concerned with the risks faced by the vulnerable, the threats posed by the dangerous and reducing the harm caused to the former by the latter. In response multi-agency case management arrangements have proliferated and come to represent a 'new orthodoxy' for the police and their partners. However, evidence about the effectiveness of such schemes is in short supply. This paper describes an attempt to reduce recurrent violent crime in Slough (England) through the application of multi-agency case management techniques, as part of the Police Foundation's Police Effectiveness in a Changing World project. Despite being modest in scale, the programme was subject to a thorough impact and process evaluation, which showed that although it secured strong local support, improved multi-agency working, increased information sharing and catalysed 'sensible' activity; it did not achieve a measurable reduction in violence. This paradox raises a number of important questions: how can multi-agency process improvements be translated into better outputs and outcomes? Can tasking work better in a partnership setting? What can realistically be expected from these schemes? Most critically it highlights the urgent need for more evidence about what works in multi-agency case management and in what circumstances multi-agency case management works.

Between 2011 and 2015 the Police Foundation research team worked with the police and their community safety partners in two English towns – Luton and Slough – to identify persistent local crime problems, improve the way in which these were understood, develop and implement appropriate interventions, and assess both the outcomes of these and the challenges of doing so. In the process it was hoped that valuable lessons might be learned about the routes to, enablers of and dependencies for effective policing under current conditions and in the context of change.

Later this year we will publish full reports setting out the findings from each of the *Police Effectiveness in a Changing World* project sites. In advance, the research team has produced a series of thematic papers bringing together key project learning from both towns and addressing the main issues that these raise for policing in the second decade of the twenty first century.

This is the third paper in this series dealing specifically with the challenge of effective partnership working at a time when all agencies are confronted with rapid social change, new priorities and significant internal reform.

Policing in partnership: finally mainstream, new manifestations

It has become established wisdom that neither the police nor any other agency can effectively deal with crime and public safety issues alone. This is because crime problems are often 'wicked' ones¹ that is, they have complex, social and interconnected causes and thus require solutions that address these from different perspectives, using a range of tools, skills, powers and expertise in a 'joined-up' way. To this end, partnership working has become a progressively more prominent feature of policing over the last half century.² Milestones, in the UK context, have included Home Office Circulars in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, The Morgan Report on safer communities (1991), The Crime and Disorder Act (1998), which established the statutory requirement for police and local authorities to work together in Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs)³, and the national roll-out of Neighbourhood Policing across England and Wales in 2008.

Although the challenge of assessing the contribution of such a broad and varied working approach is substantial, enough evidence has amassed to support the conclusion that *'on balance...the principle of applying partnership working as a component of initiatives to tackle crime and disorder problems is effective'*⁴. Working with other agencies is also fundamental to delivering innovative and 'diverse'⁵ responses to crime including within a problem-oriented approach⁶, and collaboration is

therefore a key component in the concept of *informed proactivity* developed during this project to describe the mode of working best suited to delivering effective policing⁷.

The police have not always taken to partnership working with enthusiasm⁸, however there is evidence of a sea-change in attitudes, with the mainstream exposure of officers to multi-agency practice, including through neighbourhood policing, leading to 'pragmatic' acceptance of its value and palatability as a way of working⁹. This is a transformation we recognise from our time in Luton and Slough. Although in the early part of the project we found some evidence of partnership marginalised to a specialism – a superintendent and small staff (of the kind described elsewhere as a 'trumpets and pamphlets department'¹⁰) that 'did partnership' so others could 'get on with police business' – this was an anachronism rather than the norm.

Collaboration is a key component of informed proactivity.

Overall, and in particular during the implementation phase of the project in 2014/15, we encountered police officers in both towns who, along with their colleagues in other agencies, genuinely embraced collaboration and were engaged in numerous examples of well-established multi-agency practice. In small scale surveys of community safety practitioners in each town, more than 80 per cent thought local agencies *worked (very or fairly) well together to tackle crime, disorder and related social problems*, and more than half thought *the way agencies worked together had improved in recent years* – with most of the rest suggesting it had stayed the same rather than deteriorated.

Based on the experience of this project it is clear that multi-agency working is now close to the mainstream of local policing, however it is also clear that, in the

¹ Rittel and Webber (1973).

² Crawford and Cunningham (2015), Berry et al. (2011).

³ Which later became Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs).

⁴ Berry et al. (2011).

⁵ Based on a synthesis of the research literature, Weisburd and Eck (2004) concluded that there was little evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of 'standard model' policing activities (general patrol, rapid response, reactive investigation etc.). They argued that more promise can be found in innovations that extend from the traditional police activity-set along two axes; the *diversity of the approach* (for example working with new partners, as opposed to a relying on narrow law enforcement tactics) and the *degree of focus* (for example on hotspots). Most promising of all were initiatives that combined diverse approaches *and* were highly focused (for example problem-oriented policing).

⁶ Problem oriented policing developed from a critique of conventional police activities first made by Herman Goldstein (1979). Goldstein challenged the prevailing view of police work as a series of discrete incident responses and instead advocated refocusing on the 'problems' that connected them. The approach emphasises collecting and analysing information from a range of sources to improve understanding of problems and their causes, and enlisting the support of other agencies and individuals to develop and deliver 'upstream' solutions. The problem-orientated approach was field-tested by Eck and Spelman (1987) and codified into a four stage problem-solving process of

Scanning, Analysis, Response and Assessment (or 'SARA') which has been shown to work at least 'modestly' well (Weisburd et al., 2008). The SARA model provided the template for the crime reduction work carried out in Luton and Slough as part of this project.

⁷ Higgins and Hales (2016).

⁸ Bullock et al. (2006).

⁹ O'Neill and McCarthy (2014).

¹⁰ Crawford and Cunningham (2015).

context of public sector austerity, and the local organisational restructures that have followed, it has become more difficult to sustain – as the following quotations from practitioners in both towns explain:

“When I first started all the agencies had really robust working relationships, but now it’s difficult; it’s much harder... Funding’s cut, staffing’s cut, there are less staff doing the same amount of work. A lot of agencies can’t get to the meetings...so you don’t have that networking part as well”.

“It is getting harder now because there aren’t so many resources around, and I suppose the different areas of the partnership are focused on what they need to focus on and their core business”.

“I think the biggest problem is there’s too many changes in other agencies all the time, there’s new faces all the time, so you’re constantly getting to know new people”.

On the whole however (as reflected in the next quotation), we encountered agencies and practitioners committed to facing these challenges together.

“I think in austerity, partnership is probably of far greater importance, because rather than one organisation trying to solve everything on their own and throwing everything at it, each organisation can do their little bit – that will hopefully make for a more efficient [response] in the first place”.

Partnership was also a defining characteristic of the project methodology, which involved Police Foundation researchers accompanying local practitioners through a long-term revolution of the problem oriented policing ‘SARA’ cycle. The scanning processes, which selected the crime problems for attention in each town, were carried out following extensive local consultation; analysis was conducted on datasets from a range of agencies, culminating in a set of workshops that brought practitioners together to develop the findings into options for responses, some of which were then developed and delivered by multi-agency working groups¹¹.

¹¹ Summarised in Higgins and Hales (2016).

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In Luton this resulted in Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) working with colleagues from the Fire and Rescue Service and local authority environmental health teams to conduct ‘street-survey’ visits to burglary hotspots, identify vulnerable properties and engage with residents. It also led to the local Home Improvement Agency and local authority housing department agreeing to take police referrals for home security improvement work, and to a council-employed community development officer working with police officers to start a neighbourhood improvement group in a transient neighbourhood with high burglary rates.

In Slough, building on analysis that characterised violence in the town as diffuse and varied (rather than concentrated and easily framed as a coherent ‘problem’), but which also showed that some individuals were involved in violent incidents time and again, the Violence Multi-Agency Panel (henceforth VMAP) was formed. VMAP was a ‘virtual team’ comprising practitioners from local neighbourhood policing teams, social services (and other local authority safeguarding functions), housing, young people’s services, probation, drugs and alcohol treatment services, mental health services, domestic abuse support and several other local third-sector support organisations. The group came together on a fortnightly basis to take a systematic approach to devising and delivering preventative interventions in the cases of individuals recurrently coming to police attention in relation to violence.

This paper focuses on the second of these initiatives as an example of a form of multi-agency working that is becoming increasingly important to

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contemporary policing and, as issues of harm and vulnerability increasingly move centre-stage, has begun to consume a greater proportion of police resources¹². In addition to close collaboration between agencies, this mode of working is characterised by a *case-based* approach which addresses crime, public protection and/or safeguarding issues at the level of priority individuals (or sometimes couples or families) with personal case-histories and 'risky' futures. It stands apart from approaches which take either incidents or 'problems' as the principle unit of focus – and is one which represents relatively new territory for the police compared to their colleagues in probation or social services, for whom case-work is core business.

Multi-agency case management

Multi-agency case management has become a distinct mode of working, but it represents the convergence of two streams of activity. The first is principally concerned with managing offenders and reducing reoffending and includes practices such as Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), through which criminal justice agencies discharge their statutory duty to manage violent and sex offenders. It also includes schemes such as the Prolific and Priority Offender (PPO) initiative – introduced in 2004 to coordinate enforcement and rehabilitation for the most prolific (usually acquisitive) offenders – which was later subsumed within a broader approach to Integrated Offender Management (IOM)¹³.

The second stream also involves the police and others in coordinated case-work, but focuses on keeping vulnerable individuals safe, including through Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs), which coordinate the response to the highest risk victims of domestic violence, and Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH), which deal with cases of children and other vulnerable people at risk of harm and abuse.

The caseloads of many of these schemes have expanded in recent years¹⁴ but in addition, the

palate of practices and techniques which they share (risk and needs assessment, case-conferencing, information sharing, key-working etc.), has increasingly becoming familiar and 'best' practice for the police and others, and has found new applications in national schemes such as the government's Troubled Families programme and in myriad local iterations (of which VMAP was just one example).

It is important to note, however, that despite the rapid expansion of multi-agency case management,

there is limited evidence of its effectiveness as an approach. Reoffending analyses have indicated that the introduction of MAPPA coincided with a four percentage point reduction in reoffending by eligible offenders¹⁵ and that the PPO cohort committed fewer offences after the introduction of the scheme¹⁶, however neither of these studies was able to generate a sound counterfactual or strong evidence of a causal link. IOM has been recognised as 'promising'¹⁷ yet quantitative evaluations are scarce and show either negative or highly tentative outcomes¹⁸. Evaluations of multi-agency case management in the safeguarding sphere typically report very positive qualitative appraisals from those involved, but include little outcome data – and none (that we are aware of) make use of control or comparison groups¹⁹. Early findings from the Troubled Families programme appeared promising²⁰ but were greeted with some scepticism,²¹ and it has been

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¹² College of Policing (2015).

¹³ Home Office and Ministry of Justice (2010).

¹⁴ College of Policing (2015).

¹⁵ Peck (2011), Bryant et al. (2015).

¹⁶ Dawson and Cuppleditch (2007).

¹⁷ HM Inspectorate of Probation and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (2014).

¹⁸ Dawson et al. (2011), Williams and Barak (2012).

¹⁹ Steel et al. (2011), Crockett et al. (2013).

²⁰ DCLG (2014).

²¹ Crossley (2015).

reported that a recent (as yet unpublished) evaluation shows that it has failed to live up to ambitious expectations²².

More broadly, of the most robust studies on multi-agency practice assembled for a Rapid Evidence Assessment, none that reported a significant positive impact could be described as a case-management approach²³ and the 'matrix' of crime reduction studies (compiled by Lum and colleagues²⁴) indicates that approaches targeted at individuals tend to be less effective than those focused on small places. It is in the context of this shallow and equivocal evidence-base that the findings of the VMAP evaluation should give pause for reflection.

The Slough Violence Multi-Agency Partnership (VMAP)

The Slough VMAP programme was an attempt to cut violent crime by focusing attention on those individuals who were involved in violence time and again. In the priority wards on which it focused, analysis showed that one in four victims of violence, and one in three violent offenders, had previously been involved in violent crime within the preceding year. It also showed that the same individuals frequently came to notice in different roles (as both victims and offenders) and in different circumstances (both domestic abuse and other violent incidents), and that recurrent violence was strongly predictive of further involvement in violence. With few situational options available to tackle violent crime, and acknowledging that – other than for the minority who qualified for processes such as MARAC or MAPPAs – recurrence went largely unrecognised, bespoke case-level interventions to address the risk of future offending and/or victimisation held the promise of sustained reductions in crime, harm and service demand.

VMAP attempted to systematise multi-agency attention by using police recorded crime data. On a

fortnightly basis, an analysis of recent crime reports identified those individuals who had come to notice (as violence victims and offenders) within four pilot wards, for at least the second time in the last year. The resulting list was shared among participating agencies (under the terms of a data sharing agreement) and subjected to research across multi-agency databases. Once every two weeks the VMAP panel convened²⁵, shared case information and expertise, and carried out a case-based problem solving process that sought to form hypotheses about the factors contributing to on-going risk (of recurrence) in individual cases – and then task appropriate intervention actions, based on the theories generated.

During the pilot year, the panel met on 26 occasions, considered nearly 300 cases (although some of these were filtered out through a 'triage' process) and generated more than 650 actions. Throughout the process the Police Foundation team provided programme support, acted as observers and conducted process and impact evaluations – feeding back emerging findings to shape delivery, as part of an on-going action research approach.

Process evaluation: the joy of partnership

In terms of multi-agency working, VMAP can be considered a resounding implementation success. From the outset, it benefited from strong practitioner buy-in, reflected in sustained attendance figures and endorsement from a broad set of participating agencies. Although not without its teething problems, including a caseload that ballooned too quickly and initial difficulties in getting relevant case information 'in the room' for meetings, the hard work of the coordinating team and fine-tuning through action research, resulted in a process that matured rapidly, as reflected in improved survey ratings from the practitioner group between the third and eighth month of the pilot (see Figure 1, overleaf).

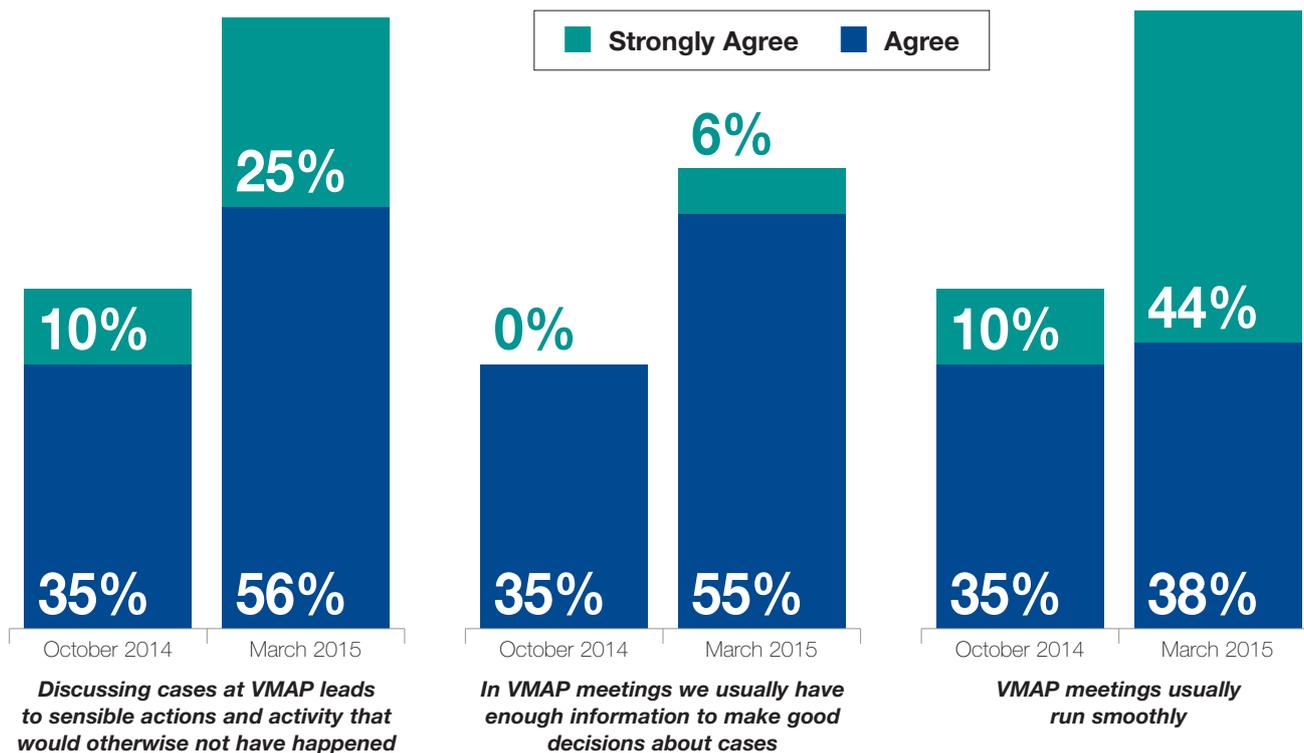
²² Cook (2016).

²³ Berry et al. (2011) – in one study (Scott et al., 2002) a positive impact on recidivism of violent offenders was observed, however the approach was programmatic (all individuals were the subject of a standard treatment) rather than using a tailored case management approach; other positive impacts related to initiatives that were not targeted at individual cases.

²⁴ Lum et al. (2010).

²⁵ VMAP panel meetings were attended by an average of 14 representatives from relevant police and local authority functions (community safety, social services, safeguarding, young people's services, housing etc.), probation, community mental health services, drugs and alcohol treatment services, domestic abuse support and local third sector organisations. Meetings were co-chaired by a police chief inspector and a local authority community safety manager with analytic and coordination support provided by the police.

Figure 1: VMAP participant practitioners' views on process and working arrangements (surveys conducted October 2014 (n=20) and March 2015 (n=17))



As previously noted, VMAP was implemented into a largely hospitable environment; many of those involved had experience of partnership working and were convinced of its benefits (and a minority who were not quickly 'self-selected' out without detriment) – however it was also clear that the initiative became valued for the additional depth and breadth of multi-agency collaboration it catalysed, as the quotations below illustrate.

"I always 'big up' VMAP...if you come to VMAP you'll have these people basically on the doorstep, you can ask them anything about anything...you build that relationship with them through VMAP...they're not only there to deal with VMAP cases, because they can help you with other cases as well."

"Networking; everyone has got to really know each other...and that really helps as well for the support we are giving as a whole."

"It has done nothing but strengthen our links with key partners."

The VMAP initiative became valued for the depth and breadth of multi-agency collaboration it catalysed.

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Practitioners also reported benefits for their own work in terms of bringing new cases to attention, avoiding duplication, improving case knowledge, personalising referral processes and, perhaps most importantly, for presenting a consistent and unified response to service users.

"They [service users] are not happy to tell their story to everyone, time and time again, but if it can be approached as one. That is what a lot of our clients will say, that we don't want to keep telling everyone what's happening. So, we should be coming together."

The extent to which VMAP acted as an enabling mechanism for neighbourhood policing was particularly encouraging, with the contrast between the 'usual' and new approaches summed up neatly by one neighbourhood officer.

"Well, it [violent crime] has been addressed in the past by reacting to what's gone on and I'll

go to it one day, she [a colleague] will go to it the next, he will go to it the next, and there's absolutely no continuity in how to deal with that particular person...now we're talking about how all of us around that table can work to deal with that person."

Local officers felt they benefited from improved flows of information, both out of police systems, and from colleagues in other agencies to 'the front line'; a benefit that was clearly reciprocal.

"I don't think we'd [previously] have got all the research which is what underpins everything. I certainly wouldn't have had anybody to be able to put it into some sort of format and, you know, to look at ... actually, this is the issue. So there's been a lot of benefits to it."
(Neighbourhood police officer)

"[Other VMAP practitioners] will give me the personalities of the people we're talking about because, they'll know a little bit about them that I don't know, and I think that's really important. So that young lad... [who] assaulted somebody, one of the youth workers was telling me what he's like and what he enjoys and stuff. If I go and visit him I know that, don't I?"
(Neighbourhood police officer)

"What I find quite useful, is information that we're given from the neighbourhood police officers, on that day to day basis how that person's behaving in the community, because that service user's not necessarily going to give us that information and that's something we can [use to] challenge that individual."
(Non-police offender manager)

As these comments illustrate, at its best VMAP promoted the kind of informed proactivity which the evidence base tells us is most likely to be effective²⁶.

It is also pertinent to note that VMAP appeared to perform well against the checklist of enabling mechanisms associated with effective partnership working²⁷. It benefited from strong **leadership**, both operationally and from the Local Policing Area (LPA) commander and local authority chief executive who offered reputational sponsorship and the

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occasional injection of 'hard power'. The force chief constable also took a personal stake in the project by funding a part-time coordinator post. VMAP managed to surmount traditional barriers in relation to **data-sharing**. Through shared training and with the right agreements in place, participants clearly became mindful of the dangers and drawbacks of not sharing information.

"Everyone's got so much information here, and when we look at Serious Case Reviews that are going on all around the country, it's like, 'oh, yes, they knew that, they knew that'... and we sit together, and it's like we've got a whole picture of this person now... we didn't know that you were involved, and you didn't know we were involved, and, actually, that's not great, so we need to work better at that."

"That's where it [VMAP] sort of comes in, because sometimes people can be working in silos, the whole idea is you open it up, so everyone is aware of the situation, and if they can add additional benefit and support to those individuals, then that's the place to do it."

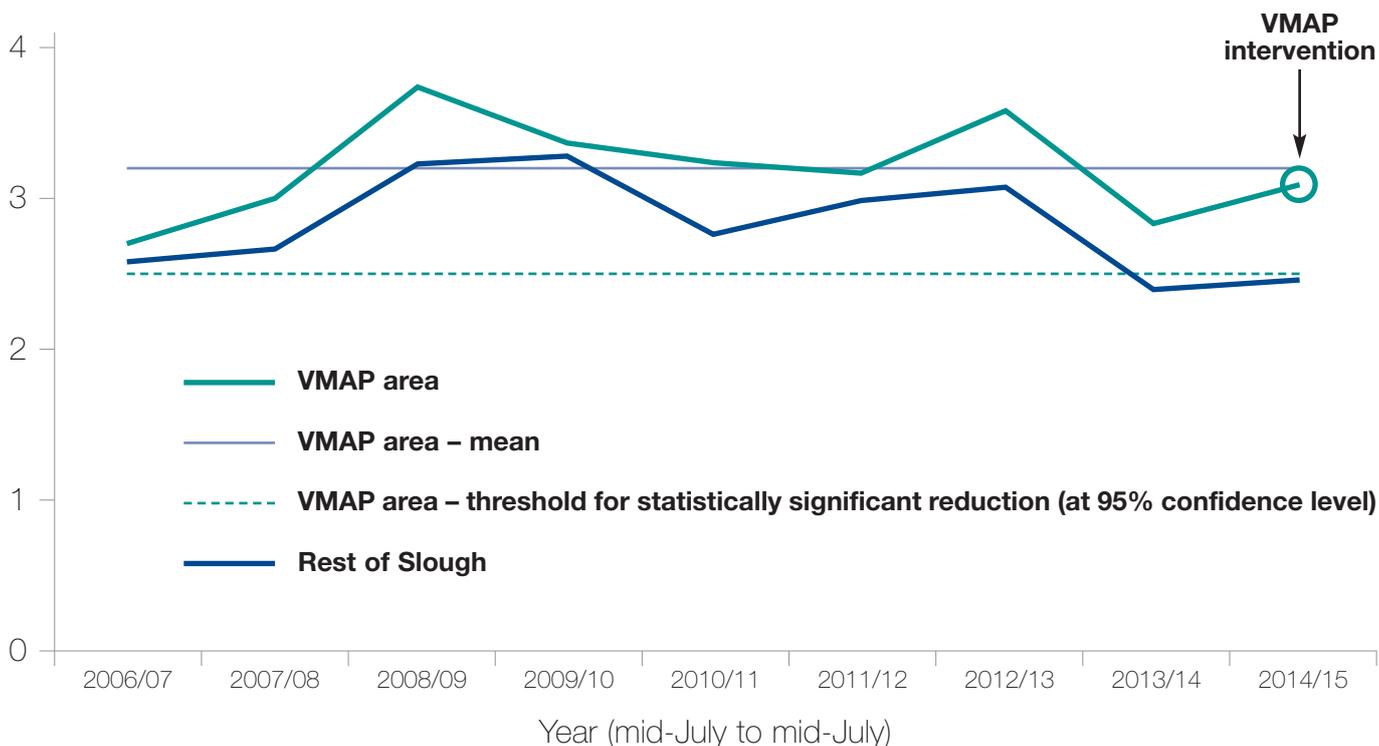
Although **co-location** was not a feasible option, partners clearly recognised improvements in inter-agency **communication** – when surveyed towards the end of the pilot 80 per cent of participants said that they were now *more likely to get in touch with colleagues in other agencies* and that VMAP had given them a *better understanding of what other organisations do*²⁸. Programme **structures** were suitably flexible (for example equivalent roles were filled by a police inspector in one area and a constable in another, as these were felt to be the most appropriate individuals for the role), the Police Foundation team provided a research and feedback mechanism and, although there were some initial gaps in terms of agency coverage, these were addressed, leading to comprehensive representation and a genuine team ethos. VMAP also benefited

²⁶ Higgins and Hales (2016).

²⁷ Berry et al. (2011), Crawford and Cunningham (2015).

²⁸ Surveyed in July 2015, n=18.

Figure 2: Subsequent occurrence rate for VMAP and 'rest of Slough' groups – 2006/07 to 2014/15



from extensive **experience**, including from a highly respected police chief inspector who chaired most meetings as well as established and experienced personnel from a number of agencies.

As a result, VMAP came to be highly valued by many of those involved in its delivery; it was seen as exemplifying the way agencies *should* work together towards common, long-term goals, and of substantial benefit in addressing the shared challenges presented by complex and concerning individual cases within the town. There was strong consensus that these efforts should continue beyond the end of the pilot.

"I think it's a fantastic tool that can be used to great benefit in the long run."

"Surely if we look at all the money that is being saved, if we are being preventative. You know, we're trying to prevent all the police call-outs, and getting to serious case reviews, and all of that, which we're not wanting. It will save a fortune, so it is much better to be preventative."

Impact assessment: the reality of evidence-based evaluation

Set against this positive experience, the evaluation finding that VMAP had no identifiable impact on

recurrent violent crime was a difficult one for practitioners to reconcile.

Careful analysis of police-recorded crime data showed that the cohort of 298 individuals who met the criteria for VMAP were involved in 132 further violent crimes within the town during the pilot period *after* VMAP had considered their cases and set in motion intervention activities; that is they were involved in at least one 'subsequent occurrence'²⁹. Comparisons against equivalent groups who *would* have been referred into VMAP had it been operational in previous years, or in the parts of

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²⁹ The subsequent occurrence rate was calculated as follows: 1) A count was made of all violent offences, during the pilot year, that involved one or more individuals whose involvement in earlier violent offences would have qualified them for referral into the VMAP process (ie these are offences that involved individuals who had been involved in at least two previous violent incidents, one within the pilot year and one within the year prior to that). As the referral criteria is 'objectively' derived from crime data, the count can also be applied to alternative time periods and geographic areas to provide comparisons. 2) The count was then divided by the sum of the total number of days between all individuals in each cohort first meeting the referral criteria for VMAP and the end of the pilot year. This approach took into account both differences in the number of eligible cases between periods/locations and the distribution of these throughout the year. In the chart the rate of subsequent occurrence is shown per 1,000 VMAP 'protected' days. For a full methodology see Chapman, Higgins and Hales (forthcoming).

Slough not covered by the scheme (who had a generally lower tendency for recurrence), gave no reason to suggest that this rate would have been any different had VMAP not been in place (see Figure 2 on previous page).

Further analysis for various sub-groups of the caseload (including separating out those referred in as victims and offenders, and those who had received most attention), as well as of the 'seriousness' of subsequent incidents and of a wider indicator of demand on police resources, all supported the conclusion of no programme effect.

The paradox of evidence and orthodoxy

How can we explain this failure to achieve effective impact in the face of 'text-book' partnership collaboration and resounding local endorsement? One possibility of course is that, with its focus on tackling 'root causes', the benefits of the VMAP approach did not have time to filter through into crime (and demand) outcomes. This was a sentiment frequently offered by practitioners:

"We have had a huge success in terms of bringing VMAP together, bringing partners together, sharing information and establishing I suppose what some people would see is quite a powerful partners' meeting. But in terms of reducing violence, I think probably the project should've had another 12 months to try to achieve that."

"VMAP will only impact the community if it's given the longevity to be able to impact the community. Today it won't change anything, it just won't because it hasn't been working long enough or running long enough to be able to do that. My only fear is that all this hard work gets thrown out the window one day without actually really understanding why and that would be it. Because VMAP is a process that you'll know in five years' time what a fantastic thing it was to start."

There are certainly challenges for evidence-based evaluation in assessing the maturity of initiatives, however in this instance we would draw attention instead to the level of active intervention generated

through the VMAP process. Without seeking to dismiss the value of the more 'intangible' benefits already suggested (stronger inter-agency relationships, improved information flows etc.) analysis of VMAP's formal outputs – the 657 actions set during meetings – gives some cause to question its potential for potency. Almost two thirds of these actions can be categorised as 'information actions' that is, they were either tasks for VMAP members to monitor and report back on the outcome of on-going processes (investigations, court cases, bail hearings etc. – 38 per cent), or to conduct further research (23 per cent), while a further eight per cent of actions were 'administrative'.

Only 18 per cent of the actions set during VMAP required a direct attempt by practitioners to engage with an individual victim or offender (this equates to 97 actions relating to 57 members of the caseload – about 20 per cent). A further five per cent of actions related to engagement with (or other action pertaining to) linked parties (often children), while other less frequent activities included initiating more detailed case conferences outside of the VMAP forum, formal referral to other agencies, and 'flagging' on various systems (eg for a particular course of action to be enacted in event of arrest). In the light of this it seems reasonable to hypothesise that VMAP was not effective quite simply *because not enough of substance happened as a result.*

It is worth stating here that although some concerns about outputs were raised (gently) by the research team as part of the action research process, those involved never expressed reservations at opportunities missed or under-performance. In surveys most thought VMAP *stood a good chance of reducing violence*, more than 70 per cent thought VMAP would *improve service in individual cases* and, (after initial teething problems) 80 per cent agreed that VMAP *generated sensible activity that would otherwise not have happened*. There was a clear consensus among participants that VMAP was doing everything it could, and that that was worth doing.

Four observations are pertinent to understanding why both outputs and outcomes were not more conspicuous.

First, it proved extremely difficult to achieve meaningful 'problem-solving' in the cases

identified through the VMAP process. There were certainly 'success stories'; in one case, a family with feuding teenage sons were helped to find more suitable accommodation. In another, a couple with a long history of domestic abuse (forced back into co-habitation by deteriorating health) were supported to resume independent living. In a third, a homeless drug and alcohol dependent man, making progress with his treatment, was provided with help into accommodation and a more stable lifestyle. It is fair to say that these outcomes would not have happened without VMAP. In many other cases, however, practicable intervention avenues were either not apparent and/or subjects refused to engage with the services on offer. More was not done because it was not obvious what more *could* be done and, as problematic and seemingly intractable cases began to re-present, practitioners' frustrations began to show:

"That's the thing that probably galls a lot of people. We're sitting here, we're giving up our valuable time, and we're having a ten minute conversation about someone that's going round and round and round the system, and we, kind of, know that they will continue to do that."

One notable feature of VMAP was the extent to which examining cases of recurrent violence opened the door to a host of complex long-term needs (including drug and alcohol dependency, homelessness and mental health), often in the context of chaotic lifestyles and destructive but co-dependent relationships. **Our second observation is that the level of additional service resource required to meaningfully attempt to 'problem-solve' these issues, was just not available** in Slough (and, we suspect, would also not be available in many other places). As one practitioner explained, even getting to the point of understanding the drivers of harmful and risky behaviour in complex cases could require intensive investment of resources.

In many cases practicable intervention avenues were not apparent and/or subjects refused to engage with the services on offer.

In the majority of cases, finding capacity to 'own' cases and attempt concerted engagement, proved unrealistic.

"Unless somebody is willing to talk about why they need to drink a litre of vodka to get themselves through the day [we will not make progress]... it needs [support from] somebody that can find the key...but I guess it's finding the right person. And of course, as services are being withdrawn or are being cut, that whole ability for people to spend the time and the effort and the energy...is starting to be reduced."

Beyond a part time coordinator post funded by the chief constable, some funded training and the research and project development capacity provided by the Police Foundation, VMAP received no additional resource. It was delivered within the existing capacity of partner agencies and had no 'outreach function' or dedicated key-workers. It required busy practitioners, from stretched services, to find time in their schedules to attend meetings, carry out database checks and complete whatever additional intervention activity they could. In the majority of cases, finding capacity to 'own' cases and attempt concerted engagement, proved unrealistic. It is also pertinent to note that several participating commissioned and third-sector services declared themselves 'at capacity' during the period, while other services lamented tightened service frameworks that constrained the contribution they were able to offer. More was not tasked because it was generally understood that only a little more could be done.

The third observation relates to the style of tasking and accountability monitoring adopted within the VMAP process. A key factor in generating the positive momentum and strong practitioner buy-in that amassed behind VMAP was the highly consensual and inclusive spirit in which it was managed; this owed much to the tone set by the chair and appeared to be very much 'the way things are done' in Slough. While this approach generated willing volunteering at times, it is also possible that it served (in combination with the factors previously mentioned) to hamper decisive tasking and accountability (the

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second quotation below, though intended as a positive reflection, is perhaps revealing):

"People are going 'put this down as an action for me, I'll do this', and it's just a really refreshing way of looking at things."

"No-one gets put on the spot here, nobody gets put on the spot. It's all transparent...you know what you're coming into."

It is also relevant to note that 40 per cent of all actions set (largely by the police chair) were assigned to other police personnel. In the chair's words;

"...my own staff, my own teams I know very well. I know what I can and can't say to them. And it's easier to put the pressure on if I need to."

This is a fundamental dilemma when delivering activity in partnership: how to harness the benefits of lateral collaboration, without diminishing the power of vertical command and control structures? It was, incidentally, also a challenge encountered in different circumstances, during our parallel project in Luton, and one which is likely to become more pressing as multi-agency arrangements continue to widen and deepen.

Fourth and finally, we draw attention to the role of orthodoxy; the way activity was framed and influenced, albeit subtly and subconsciously, by habitual ways of doing things learned in other similar partnership arrangements. Research draws attention to the pitfalls of a *strategy of multiple aims*³⁰ in which accommodating the varied interests and goals of all collaborating partners, can lead to a lack of programme focus. We raise the question of

A fundamental dilemma when delivering activity in partnership is how to harness lateral collaboration without diminishing the power of vertical command.

³⁰ Crawford and Cunningham (2015).

whether this plurality of purpose has, to some degree, become internalised within agencies – not least the police – and the extent to which this might have undermined the focus on this programme's explicit goal (of crime reduction). VMAP benefited from a consensus view that violence was 'everybody's business', however the specific aim of reducing violent crime incidents within the case-load perhaps got lost in a more general shared effort to 'make a difference'. One reflection on VMAP case discussions is that they often seemed to default to risk management, for example ensuring social services were aware that children were present in a house where violence occurred. While this is sensible 'joined up' working, its contribution specifically to reducing recorded violent crime, (especially in the short term) is probably tenuous at best.

VMAP benefited from a consensus view that violence was 'everybody's business', however the specific aim of reducing violent crime incidents within the case-load may have got lost in the more general shared effort to 'make a difference'.

A related concern – albeit one that was never explicit – is that participants liked VMAP because it (perhaps subconsciously) provided reputational cover for agencies dealing with risk, and as such participants were satisfied simply to be discussing cases they knew about in a forum with multiple partners. As Baroness Jay has cautioned however "*An issue which belongs to everybody round the...table effectively belongs to nobody*"³¹. The dangerous allure of diffused responsibility within multi-agency working must be recognised and guarded against.

Implications: confronting the paradox

The emergence of risk, harm and vulnerability as matters of prime concern for the police is a central feature of the way their world is changing. Due to increased awareness of complexity, the need for efficiency and the growing imperative to

³¹ Quoted in Wood (2016).

demonstrate due-process, multi-agency case management has become the dominant paradigm for addressing these new priorities. There are perhaps worryingly few other big ideas.

In this context, the findings of the *Police Effectiveness in a Changing World* project in Slough may raise some unsettling questions for policy makers and practitioners. There is potential for genuine existential discomfort here in response to an example of service provision, enthusiastically delivered by dedicated and experienced professionals, optimised and coordinated by multi-agency collaboration, that still 'did not work'. To compound matters, where an evidence-base might provide some reassurance and direction, there is worryingly little to reach for. Uncomfortable conclusions however must be confronted and their implications considered. We finish by summarising the most striking of these and offer five recommendations for progress.

VMAP was a small programme – it operated in four wards of one town, for a one year period. Due to its modest scale, the evaluation techniques available were of limited rigour, however the evidence generated about its (in this case lack of) impact, surpasses that in existence for a number of much larger, more widespread and more heavily resourced schemes that share similar principles. Of course this does not mean that those schemes do not work; what it shows is that adopting orthodox 'best' practice – forming caseloads, sharing information, engaging in multi-agency case discussions and setting sensible actions – does not guarantee impact, even if it feels to those involved that it should.

It is a familiar plea, but there is an urgent need for more evidence, both on what works in multi-agency case management and in what circumstances multi-agency case management works. The VMAP experience should act as an antidote to complacency and a call for bravery.

Recommendation 1. Those operating such schemes should seek out robust evaluation (and those designing new schemes should build in evaluation from the start), both for the sake of their own effectiveness and efficiency and to advance the paradigm as a whole.

Adopting orthodox 'best' practice – forming caseloads, engaging in multi-agency case discussions and setting sensible actions – does not guarantee impact.

One cautionary lesson from VMAP is that outputs as well as outcomes need to be closely scrutinised and objectively appraised. In our monitoring role we should admit our failure to see beyond process improvements until it was too late.

Recommendation 2. We would implore others to learn from this and (placing 'intangible', internal benefits to one side) dispassionately weigh the additionality of the quantity and quality of intervention activity generated, against the time and resource expended on process coordination.

We are also not blind to the fact that by taking a case based approach to addressing violence in Slough we returned somewhat ironically, to the kind of individuated response model that problem orientated policing approaches attempt to move beyond. Managing priority cases will always be important, however in doing so there is a danger of failing to identify the common features that link them together. In this instance, analysing crime gave us little except priority cases to work with; however we speculate that a secondary process of *analysing those priority cases* (a process we start in our full site report) might provide insights into issues or areas of service provision in which strategic change might be considered. It is another matter however, given the pressures and constraints currently facing services, whether these could realistically be delivered.

Recommendation 3. Agencies should use multi-agency data-sets to systematically analyse the characteristics and needs of the cases referred into multi-agency case management schemes, and seek to understand local drivers and gaps in combined service provision.

Tasking and accountability within a multi-agency framework appears to present a dilemma to which further attention might usefully be given. The management style required to create buy-in, positivity, willingness and occasional outbreaks of

volunteering, appears at odds with the directive command and robust challenge sometimes required for task-oriented delivery. In this regard, the idea that local partner agencies might become increasingly integrated within public-protection/harm-reduction units, operating with pooled budgets and single command structures³² may offer a route to progress.

Recommendation 4. In considering the case for closer and deeper service integration, agency leaders should recognise the inherent weaknesses in multi-agency tasking arrangements and the potential benefits of a more unified command structure.

Any such integrated function, however, must have clarity about its purpose. Despite their ostensible crime-cutting mission the police have learned – in part through working with others – to also try to be risk-managers, problem-solvers, harm-reducers, needs-addressors, duty-doers, demand-cutters, reputation-managers, confidence-generators and reassurance providers. A shared orthodoxy has emerged that can often suggest ‘sensible’ case responses in line with this broad ‘difference making’ project, but which may do little to address the *particular* purposes set for the specific programme of which that case forms a part. It is important, therefore, to consider what it is realistic to expect from multi-agency case management arrangements.

³² National Debate Advisory Group (2015).

With hindsight, given the level of complex need encountered, and the level of resource available, genuine problem-solving and crime-reduction were perhaps never realistic outcomes for the VMAP programme. Harm-reduction, risk-management, or even procedural compliance might be more realistic goals for multi-agency case management, but achieving clarity and consensus, and finding suitable metrics on which to assess performance and measure success, are likely to prove formidable challenges requiring leadership from the top. The formal discourse lags behind multi-agency partners’ intuitive appreciation of the synergies and interdependencies between their work.

Recommendation 5. Politicians and service leaders should clarify and better articulate the shared purpose of the partnership project, and the roles that particular services should play within it.

What we expect of our police service is changing. The new mission makes their work increasingly intertwined with that of other agencies, and there appears to be no alternative but to work ever-more closely together. The VMAP experiment reminds us however that closer cooperation is not in itself sufficient to bring about transformative change to risky lives. It also highlights the urgent need to build a better understanding of what those agencies that make risk and vulnerability their business can do together, to reduce harm and keep people safe.

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About the Police Foundation

The Police Foundation is the only independent think tank focused entirely on developing knowledge and understanding of policing and crime reduction, while challenging the police service and the government to improve policing for the benefit of the public. The Police Foundation acts as a bridge between the public, the police and the government, while being owned by none of them.

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