Recent years have seen the publication of a series of official and other reports (HM Government, 2016; Sisters for Change, 2017) consultations, (Home Office, 2021) and thematic inspections of police and other service providers (HMICFRS, 2021a; HMICFRS, 2021b,) detailing new research and evidence contributing to new strategies for tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), (HM Government, 2021) including a ‘statement of expectations’ to guide the commissioning of services to support victims and survivors of violence (Home Office, 2022).

The dreadful coincidence between all this policy-level activity and the kidnap, rape and murder of Sarah Everard in South London exposed, once again, the serious risks facing women in urban areas although, as different commentators have argued, for too long interventions have focused too much upon the supposed ‘vulnerability’ of victims and rather less upon the controlling the unacceptable behaviours of potential predators (Angiolini, 2015; Rumney & McPhee, 2021).

The statistics tell their own distressing story, an HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMICFRS) Thematic inspection report (2021a) into ‘into how effectively the police engage with women and girls’ identified what it called ‘an epidemic of offending against women and girls.’ In the 12 months up to September 2020, English & Welsh police forces recorded 56,152 offences of rape and a further 96,984 other sexual offences. In 84% of these cases, the victim was female (2021b). The number of sexual offences recorded by the police has almost tripled in recent years, yet rape convictions have been dropping since 2017, falling to a record low last year; only 1.4 percent of rape cases reported to the police in 2019/20 resulting in a suspect being charged (Home Office, 2020). Recent reports of drink and needle ‘spiking’ in nightclubs (Weaver, 2022; McCann, 2022), adding to complaints about stalking, harassment (experienced by two out of three women), exposure, voyeurism (‘up skirting’), abuse and unwanted touching have pointed to predatory male behaviour turning the night-time economy into a ‘hostile environment’ for many women (HMICFRS, 2021b; ONS, 2021).

Acknowledging that it is largely men’s behaviour producing the night-time vulnerabilities experienced by many women has prompted a shift in policing strategies. HMIFRCS inspections recognised that changing approaches are called for, that ‘we can’t just police our way out of violence against women and girls’ rather more far-reaching, system-wide, changes to VAWG offences was urgently required. In May 2019, responding to the suggestion that police should scale up their policing of the night-time entertainment economy (bars and clubs), Thames Valley Police (TVP) introduced their Project Vigilant initially in Oxford. Crime reports showed that more than half of all sexual offending occurred within the City Centre, which was

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Project Vigilant: Preventing sexual violence in the Night-Time Economy

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also the most frequent location for rapes within the force area at the time (TVP, Internal Report, 2019).

The aim of Project Vigilant is to prevent sexual offences by perpetrators by proactively identifying predatory sexual behaviour and intervening to prevent this behaviour escalating to an offence. Covert officers, specifically trained in behaviour observation skills, patrol designated areas, such as outside bars and clubs, between specific times on nights identified to be the highest risk (normally Friday and Saturday but sometimes including other nights). The covert officers identify both predatory behaviour and potentially vulnerable people. This may include individuals loitering, interfering with, leering at or harassing others, or following lone intoxicated females. Once such apparently predatory behaviour has been identified, covert officers will communicate with uniformed officers who then directly intervene, using body worn video to record their interventions. Initial results reported by TVP were impressive, amounting to ‘a 50% reduction in rape and a 30% reduction in sexual assaults in the night time economy in Oxford’ (TVP, Internal Report, 2019).

At this stage, however, Project Vigilant had not so far been independently evaluated, although this became a requirement when TVP applied for Home Office funds to extend the project and broaden it to Reading, Windsor and Milton Keynes, in addition to Oxford. We were successful in winning the tender to evaluate the project, developing a mixed methods evaluation protocol intended to assess several aspects of the project. Recognising that such police projects often stand or fall on their crime reduction impacts, securing reliable data was obviously a central requirement of the evaluation work, but not the only one.

Operationalising the new VAWG agenda is also about changing police culture, tasking and priorities and an important aspect of Project Vigilant entails training officers in behaviour observation and awareness around identifying potentially predatory behaviour. Accordingly, two aspects of the evaluation were designed to assess this. In the first place, we interviewed officers (individual interviews and focus groups) to explore how they had responded to the training and the extent to which they had internalised the new priorities. In the second place, a field researcher accompanied officers on several Vigilant nightshift patrols in all four of the TVP project locations over the Xmas and into the New Year 2021 period. In the course of the interviews and focus groups, officers voiced a high level of commitment to the VAWG priorities and a clear awareness of the issues.

One officer explained:

‘I think Vigilant has given officers more confidence I suppose in challenging that sort of behaviour… And not just that, I think we’ve got a lot of new officers within the force and a lot of very young officers as well who may not be confident in sort of challenging people who may or may not be in a relationship and things like that. So I think Vigilant gives them the confidence to actually ask questions about whether people are in a relationship or whether people actually want to be with the person they’re with.’

Another officer confirmed this change in the police mindset, explaining how she and her colleague had observed a man and women walking into an alleyway:
‘We followed them and found him kissing her aggressively, but as soon as the uniformed police arrived she was able to get away. She said they’d only just met and that he’d been insistent on coming back to her address and that he’d taken her down the alleyway even though she didn’t want to go with him… I suppose I’d like to think that that would’ve been picked up by officers anyway but I think, if they’d seen it, but you can’t be sure… I’d be fairly confident that may well have turned into a rape if we’d not intervened there’.

It later transpired, on further investigation, that the man was wanted for an earlier domestic stalking offence. He was arrested.

The night-time field reports similarly contained many examples of proactive observations leading to uniformed officer interventions. In one case, officers were alerted to:

‘a very drunk female with two males in a children’s play park. They were actually sat in a children’s playhouse, smoking cannabis… the interesting part for me was that the female was highly intoxicated. The two males were absolutely not. They were completely sober. When I searched the female, away from the two men, I asked her, “Are you friends with these people?” And she said, “Yeah, no, we’re friends.” And I said, “Well, how did you meet them?” “Oh, I met them tonight.” And as I’m searching her, I think it’s dawning on her a little bit the risk that she’s put herself in. And it also gave me the opportunity to say, “I don’t think that I want to let you leave with these two individuals because I don’t think they’re safe. Do you feel like you’re safe?” And at that point, she said “no”.

In each of the encounters reported here, the purpose of the intervention was not to make an arrest, often a core policing outcome (although one suspect was arrested for a prior offence), but to prevent ‘vulnerability’ situations becoming opportunities for predatory and offensive behaviour. It follows that while crime reduction impacts will remain an important aspect of the evaluation, so will total police interventions and an assessment of offences averted, based upon officer reports. Baseline assessments of sexual offending in the intervention areas are now being drawn up based upon police data.

Two further aspects of the evaluation concern the wider developing awareness of safety in the NTE and of the Project Vigilant officer deployments. As Oxford hosts two universities, and a lively night-time scene, we sought to distribute on-line questionnaires to assess awareness of the project amongst key target groups of young women. The survey reveals only 20% of respondents appeared to be aware of Project Vigilant in Oxford, although just over 50% voiced some concerns about safety at night in the city centre. Having been made aware of the aims of Project Vigilant, around two-thirds of respondents felt uniformed police on patrol would help enhance their own perceptions of night-time safety.

Two final dimensions of the evaluation have concerned the project working with partners (for example, Rape Crisis and Thames Valley ISVA support services, the Oxford Sexual Violence Panel, the local universities, the city Council and other local stakeholders, security staffs and street pastors) to improve awareness of the project. Likewise, the project works closely with Circles, a community based voluntary organisation, regarding services to whom arrested perpetrators might be referred for support and counselling, based upon a risk prioritisation
matrix developed by TVP in consultation with psychologists. The matrix enables TVP to identify the level of risk subjects pose, drawing upon their behaviour and previous convictions. We have little evidence thus far of referrals or referral outcomes but are liaising with Thames Valley Police about extending the evaluation to explore this further.

Thus far, Project Vigilant has been commended for its focus on perpetrators and a desire to avoid victim blaming. Observational notes suggest officers have begun to take on board the re-prioritisation of VAWG and are engaging in informed proactive interventions where they suspect opportunities for predatory sexual offending may be developing. When they do intervene, officers appear less concerned with arrest and criminalisation per se, rather their interventions allow time and space for women to reflect on how their choices and opportunities and change their situations, thereby interrupting a course of events which may later turn into a sexual assault.

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