



Kent and Medway
Violence Reduction Unit
Annual Report 2025/26

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Foreword

I am delighted to introduce this year's annual report for the Kent and Medway Violence Reduction Unit. It shows a record of delivery, and a promise of more.

I want to place on record my sincere thanks to all those who have contributed over the past year. That includes colleagues in policing, local government, health, education, youth services, the voluntary and community sector, and the many partnerships that support this work across Kent and Medway.

Your commitment, professionalism and collaboration continue to make a real difference. It is astonishing to see the breadth of activity delivered and the strength of the partnerships behind it. Preventing violence is not something policing can achieve alone. It depends on agencies, services, community organisations and local people working together, sharing insight and staying focused on how we support children and young people earlier and more effectively.

This report reflects that shared commitment in practice. It highlights work taking place in schools, neighbourhoods and health settings, as well as wider efforts to strengthen prevention, improve coordination and support those most at risk. It also points to encouraging progress in reducing serious violence and knife-related offending in Kent and Medway, alongside continued efforts to intervene earlier and build a safer future for young people. What is particularly encouraging is the balance between immediate support and longer-term prevention.

Some of the most important work described in this report takes place before situations escalate, whether through education, trusted relationships, targeted support or positive activities. That kind of early action matters, because it gives young people a better chance to stay safe and make positive choices.

The report also shows the value of being willing to test ideas, learn from evidence and keep improving. Violence reduction is complex, and there is no single answer. Progress depends on strong local knowledge, careful analysis and partners being prepared to adapt their response over time. It is also good to see work from Kent and Medway receiving recognition beyond the county. Initiatives such as Buddi and the Safer Knives Replacement Scheme demonstrate how local innovation can contribute to wider learning and practice.

This is a fantastic achievement by hard-working and dedicated VRU staff and partners. Just as importantly, this report underlines the importance of listening to those most affected. Young people, families, practitioners and communities all have an essential role in shaping an effective response. Their insight helps ensure that this work remains grounded, relevant and responsive.

This report shows clear progress, but it also reminds us that there is more to do. I hope it gives readers confidence in the strength of the partnerships in place and in the shared determination to keep building safer communities for the future.

Together, we can cut crime, support victims and build trust.



Matthew Scott,
Kent Police and Crime Commissioner



Director's update

I am extremely proud of what the VRU achieved in 2025/26. We have seen significant reductions in serious violence and knife-enabled violence and this is testimony to our public health and multi-agency approach.

Alongside the incredible work supporting our community's most vulnerable children, we have influenced on a national and international level, with our Buddi tag and Safer Knives Replacement Scheme initiatives, spreading our safeguarding and prevention techniques to like-minded professionals.

We have grown as a VRU alongside our core delivery partners like Catch 22, Focused Deterrence and Sports Connect. We want our partners to be accountable, successful and innovative. Our strong ethos around robust evaluation has ensured this growth and will continue. More importantly, we will learn from evaluations and adapt services to be more effective, so that they stand up to peer and public scrutiny.

We have responded to our Year Six evaluation that highlighted a lack of provision for young people aged between 17 and 24. We have increased our multi-agency interconnectivity and service offer to vulnerable cohorts in this age range.

The VRU has continued to produce and share high-quality analytical products to target our activities. This is the bedrock of how the VRU functions and directly impacts funding decisions.

Our *Turning the Tide* conference showcased the very best of the VRU and Kent Police's work. We heard from influential speakers like Leanne Lucas, Pooja Kanda OBE and the Joe Dix Foundation. Every life affected by knife crime deeply matters to us. We learn from tragedy and actively contribute to positive change to prevent it happening again.

We value our partners personally affected by knife crime and draw inspiration and determination from them. Their voices, and that of local children and young people, matter. For the first time their voices have been included in our Strategic Needs Assessment, and we will continue to listen and improve the feedback loop so that they know they have been heard, through our work with local participation workers.

I want to thank my team and all partners for their hard work this year. I also want to thank our children and young people who have embraced positive change and set an amazing example for their peers and families.

Elizabeth Jones,
Kent and Medway VRU Director Chief Inspector



Overview of the work of the VRU in Kent and Medway



Over the last two years there have been **clear reductions in the volume of serious violence**, saving the criminal justice system and police of:



£3,743,933

in cases of violence with injury



£1,569,680

in cases of robbery (personal)



Two Kent and Medway VRU initiatives – **the Safer Knife Replacement Scheme and Buddi** – were entered into the College of Policing practice bank in 2025



487 schools in Kent have registered, which equates to 59% of all educational establishments now using the platform [341 primaries (54%) and 146 secondaries (76%)]



The Safer Knife Replacement Scheme has removed more than 1,250 knives from homes, youth hubs, community kitchens and schools



Young people

358

Young people supported through the VRU A&E Navigators programme

134

Young people referred and supported through the Catch-22 programme



1,320

Young people referred and supported through sports programmes

4



This year, four young street groups were identified within Kent

-20%

There has been a 20% reduction in offences for under-25s



-22.9%

Knife-enabled serious violence has reduced by 22.9% for under-18s and 4.5% for ages 18-25



More than 150 delegates from across the UK attended Turning the Tide on Knife Crime Together conference hosted by Kent and Medway VRU

Introduction

Kent and Medway Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) aims to reduce violence to make the county safer and improve the lives of our young people. Guided by a public health approach, the VRU brings together policing, local authorities, health, education, the voluntary and community sector, and crucially, young people and families, to address the root causes of serious violence and create safer communities across Kent and Medway.

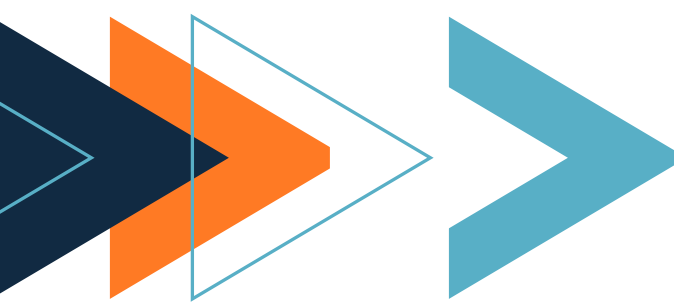
This Annual Report reflects on the VRU's activity and impact between April 2025 and March 2026. It highlights the progress made, learning gained and areas where continued focus is required. Over the past year, partners have worked collectively to strengthen early intervention, improve data sharing and deliver evidence based prevention and targeted support in areas of greatest need.

The past year marked a period of consolidation and growth for the VRU. Key initiatives – including Pol-Ed, Catch 22, Sports Connect, Focused Deterrence, Buddi tagging and the Safer Knife Replacement Scheme – continued to expand their reach and impact. Thousands of children and young people

were supported through education, mentoring, health based interventions and positive activities, while innovative local practice gained national recognition through inclusion in the College of Policing practice bank.

Throughout all areas of delivery, the VRU has remained committed to listening to the voice of children and young people, recognising their lived experience as essential to shaping meaningful and effective responses to violence. This principle has influenced the design of campaigns, services and interventions, and continues to challenge partners to work differently and more collaboratively.

Violence is complex and often rooted in adversity, inequality and unmet need. While challenges remain – particularly in relation to exploitation, evolving criminal networks and online harm – this report demonstrates that violence is preventable. By working together, investing in early help and supporting positive opportunities for young people, Kent and Medway continue to make progress toward safer, healthier and more resilient communities.



Kent Fire & Rescue Service



Kent Police



Youth Endowment Fund Toolkit helping guide approach

The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) Violence Prevention Toolkit is an evidence based guide that summarises what research tells us about what works to prevent children and young people from becoming involved in violence. It brings together findings from UK and international studies and presents them in a clear, practical way. For each type of intervention, the Toolkit explains:

- How effective the approach is likely to be
- How strong the evidence base is
- How much it typically costs
- How easy it may be to deliver well

The Toolkit covers a wide range of approaches, including mentoring, family based work, education interventions, therapy and support programmes, and community based activities. It is regularly reviewed and updated as new evidence becomes available. With resources limited to prevent violence, it is essential that funding decisions are based on the best available evidence, rather than assumptions or short term trends.

We use the YEF Toolkit as a starting point for commissioning, rather than a rigid rulebook. When we design or fund a service, we consider:

- Whether the intervention is supported by evidence
- How strong that evidence is, and how relevant it is to our local context
- Whether the programme is appropriate for the children and families we serve
- How the service can be delivered safely, ethically and inclusively
- Whether there is scope to evaluate and improve the intervention locally

In addition, we also draw on:

- Local data and insight from across Kent and Medway
- The expertise of practitioners and delivery partners
- The lived experience of children, young people and communities
- Feedback from services already operating locally

This combination ensures our work is both evidence informed and locally grounded. By aligning our work with nationally recognised evidence, while adapting it to local needs, we aim to deliver the greatest possible impact in preventing violence and creating safer futures for young people.



Serious Violence Duty

The work of the VRU and that of the organisations required to meet the Serious Violence Duty are closely linked. The VRU has continued to lead delivery of the Duty and the strategy agreed by the Serious Violence Prevention Partnership Board in January 2024. This year, the VRU has brought partners together to action the plans to reduce serious violence against each of the priorities.

Key work the VRU has been involved in this year to support the Serious Violence Duty includes:

- The VRU has worked closely with GRIP analysts to ensure that GRIP hotspots are known and referenced in any VRU analysis and that partners are aware of the hotspots so that their contribution can be included alongside that of the police. GRIP analysis is used as the first layer to our sports commissioning identified hotspots, allowing this to be overlaid with further data and ensuring we are supporting GRIP activity with preventative/diversionary activity in the right places. VRU co-ordinators are briefed and have access to the problem-solving plans for GRIP hotspots, ensuring any local activity the VRU undertakes is aligned to the overarching problem-solving plan for that area.
- Refreshed the Serious Violence Strategic Needs Assessment on behalf of the Board and the specified authorities. Having a single piece of analysis that is used to inform different strategies and partnerships has helped to ensure a shared understanding of the problems experienced by communities and a shared approach across the county.
- Community engagement has been successful for the VRU over the last year with support from an external agency, ensuring our messaging supports the preventative approach and reaches our target audience. Participation workers have been key in engaging with young people and feeding these messages back so we can utilise the information and turn it into tangible activity.

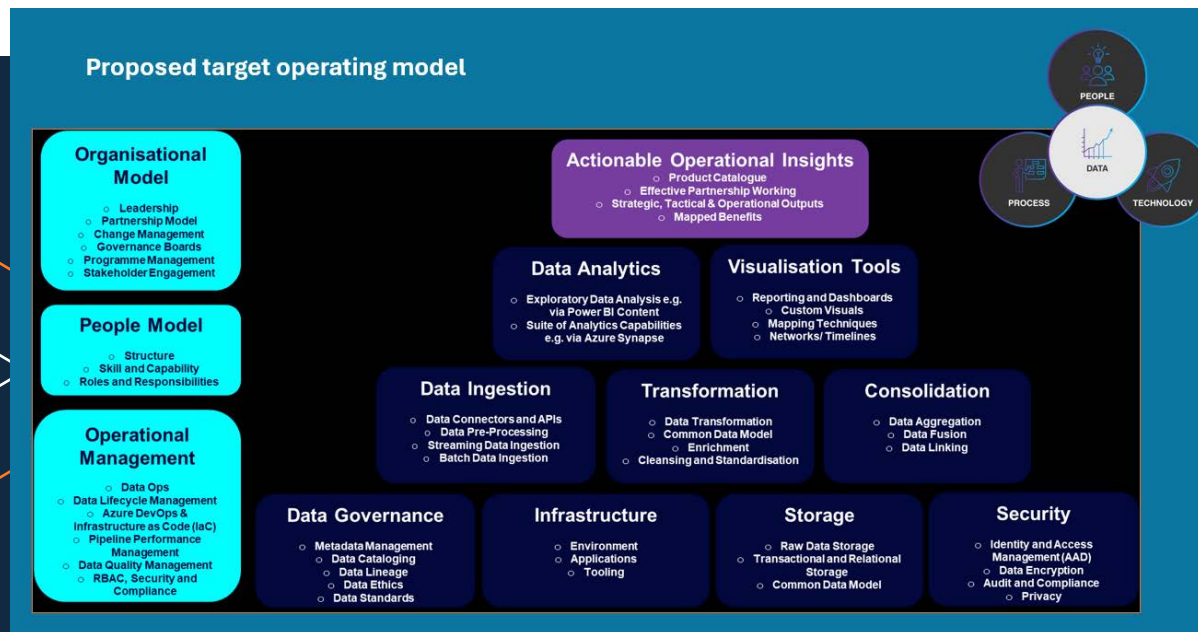


Data sharing platform

Insight gained from data analysis underpins the VRU's work in preventing violence. Developments in sharing data between partners, while ensuring full compliance with data regulations, creates a number of opportunities for the VRU to exploit.

A national data sharing solution has previously been built using the National Enabling Programme building blocks. It was commissioned to specifically support VRU delivery which gives control of the data and its use, as a no-cost/low-cost option, providing effective value for money to the public. This option is supported by Government licences and accreditation and utilises infrastructure already in place. This system is called the Common Data Platform, which was originally developed in Thames Valley as part of their Thames Valley Together partnership. It has been adopted by central government and now been made available to all forces. Kent and Medway VRU is currently progressing this as the fifth partnership to successfully adopt this technology.

The development of automated partnership data sharing pipelines and curated dashboards will enable necessary data to be matched and shared on a need-by-need basis. There will be absolute control over access and oversharing, while maintaining safeguarding, and enabling a person single view to allow up-to-date and timely sharing of person-specific data for a joined-up approach to tackling serious violence. The Common Data Platform will be progressed in 2026.



Collaborations

Young Futures pilot in Medway

The Young Futures preventative programme launched in September 2025 as a Home Office funded pilot delivered through Kent and Medway VRU. The programme supports early intervention and prevention for children and young people aged 10-17 who are vulnerable to serious violence, knife crime, anti social behaviour, criminal exploitation, and poor mental health.

Initial delivery has focused on Medway, with two schools engaged and further expansion planned to four schools from May 2026. Since launch, the programme has received 51 referrals, with 17 children and young people actively engaging in tailored, preventative interventions.

Young Futures operates through a school and police-based referral model, enabling early identification of risk for those who may not meet statutory thresholds. Engagement begins with an assessment meeting held in school or community settings, with parental or carer involvement where appropriate. This trauma informed, child centred approach ensures support is needs led, proportionate and targeted.

The programme provides structured interventions designed to build resilience and reduce risk. Introductory workshops are delivered at Sports Connect, offering a safe and accessible environment prior to formal programme engagement.

Workshop themes include toxic masculinity, knife crime prevention, mental health and wellbeing, creative arts and positive coping strategies.

Delivery is underpinned by a strong multi-agency partnership model, working with Paramount Foundation, Uprising, Sport on Your Doorstep, and Medway Youth Services, alongside statutory partners from policing, education, health, children's social care and youth justice. This coordinated approach enables shared accountability, effective information sharing and consistent support for young people.

Early outcomes demonstrate positive impact, including improved confidence, increased emotional resilience, and greater awareness of self care and wellbeing. Young people have benefited from access to positive activities, trusted adults and safe spaces outside of school hours.

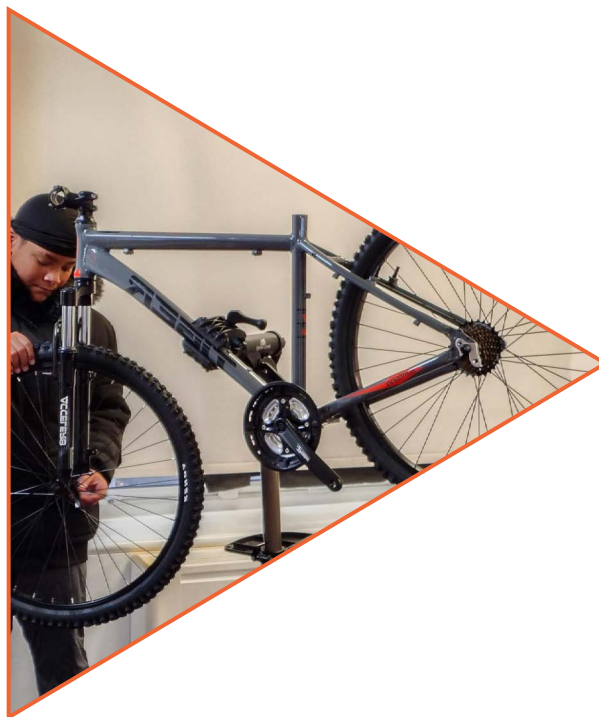
Learning from the Kent and Medway pilot will inform the national rollout of Young Futures Panels and Hubs, which are being independently evaluated by the Home Office as part of a wider programme of prevention and system reform.



Build a Bike project

Six young people engaged in the Build a Bike project, where over two days, they had the opportunity to construct their own new bicycles from scratch. Alongside the practical element, participants also took part in safety workshops and were provided with safety equipment to take home with their completed bikes.

Projects like this offer far more than just skill development — they provide young people with a positive outlet, a safe space to engage and meaningful opportunities to build relationships with trusted professionals. These experiences are vital in helping young people feel valued and supported.



Roadshows take violence prevention message into schools

Our VRU teamed up with partner organisations to take the violence prevention message on the road with a tour of local schools and colleges.

Nine secondary schools in the Ashford area were visited by the VRU's safety roadshow during January and February 2026, engaging with more than 2,100 year nine students over two weeks.

The events were used to hold important conversations about issues such as extremism, sexual health, online exploitation, knife crime and gangs.

VRU representatives were joined at the events by the Kent Child Centred Policing team, local NHS sexual health services, Kent County Council Prevent Team, Kent County Council Family Hub Youth Team and Sam Griffin from Ashford Radio as compere.

Caley Walden, VRU co-ordinator said: "The two weeks have been insightful and hard hitting. The roadshows don't lecture students, they are designed to invoke conversation around decisions and consequences, but most importantly, let the young people know that there is help and support out there."

Belinda King, Community Safety and Safeguarding Specialist Support Officer at Ashford Borough Council, said: "The passion and dedication shines through in every roadshow and I have no doubt it will make a difference in those students' lives. The organisers truly do care and this is so important in the world we currently live in."





Thank you for the support from:

- Home-Start
- Kent County Council Youth Hubs
- Kooth
- Metanoia
- Missing and Exploitation Team
- Open Road
- Prevent Schools Team
- Sam Griffin, Ashford Radio
- Sexual Health Services
- Stagecoach
- Uprising
- We Are With You





**Between May 2025
and February 2026:**

+4,300

More than 4,300 classroom lessons and 300 assemblies were delivered

130K

Nearly 130,000 children and young people received a Pol Ed input

+2,600

More than 2,600 teachers were registered on the platform

35

An average of 35 schools per week were actively using Pol Ed resources.



Pol-Ed programme supports school curriculum



Pol Ed is an education programme commissioned by our VRU to support early intervention and prevention by helping schools deliver high quality lessons on safety, citizenship, risk and the law. The programme provides age appropriate lesson plans, assemblies and targeted police inputs, enabling consistent delivery across primary and secondary settings.

Working alongside the Kent Police Child Centred Policing Team, we launched Pol Ed in May 2025. In its first nine months of delivery, the programme achieved significant reach and engagement across the county.

Content delivered through Pol Ed addressed key safeguarding and harm prevention priorities, including online safety, discrimination, personal safety, extremism, violence against women and girls (VAWG) and responsible use of technology. Delivery spanned all key stages, supporting children and young people as they progress through their education.

The programme also supports a more sustainable model of police engagement. During the academic year, more than 260 police led Pol Ed inputs reached more than 22,000 children, ensuring that officer time is used where it has the greatest preventative impact, while schools lead routine delivery. Early evidence shows that schools are embedding Pol Ed into regular curriculum delivery rather than relying on one-off sessions. Improved data collection introduced during the year is strengthening evaluation and will support clearer measurement of long term outcomes.

Overall, Pol Ed has helped to deliver a large scale, consistent prevention activity, supporting national and local priorities while reducing future demand on frontline services and provided vital information to children.

A&E Navigators target those ‘reachable moments’

The VRU continued to work in close partnership with the NHS, Kent County Council and Medway Council to deliver the A&E Navigators – Reachable Moments programme. During 2025/26, Navigators were embedded within the Accident and Emergency departments at William Harvey Hospital, Ashford, and Medway Maritime Hospital, Gillingham.

The VRU recognises that a hospital admission following injury or crisis represents a critical ‘reachable moment’ for young people. This period of heightened vulnerability provides an opportunity for early, preventative intervention that can have a lasting positive impact. At the initial stage of the intervention, Navigators engage with young people while they remain in hospital, offering immediate support, building trust and gaining an understanding of the circumstances that led to their attendance. This approach enables Navigators to identify risks, assess need and coordinate appropriate support both during the admission and following discharge.

Drawing on extensive experience of working with young people affected by violence and exploitation, Navigators understand that the most effective point for engagement is often at this earliest stage. The programme responds to the complex challenges faced by young people and communities, including violence associated with gang involvement, county lines exploitation, child sexual

exploitation, domestic abuse and substance misuse. Delivery is undertaken collaboratively with hospital safeguarding teams, youth services and colleagues from the Kent County Council Adult Response Team, ensuring a coordinated and trauma-informed response.

During 2025/26, the programme received 151 referrals in Medway and 207 referrals in Kent, with A&E Navigators supporting a total of 358 young people. The Medway Hospital A&E Navigator team was awarded Team of the Year at Medway Council’s Make a Difference Awards 2025.

While the positive impact of the A&E Navigators and the value of early intervention are widely acknowledged, the number of young people presenting at Kent hospitals with violence-related injuries during the period was relatively low. Although the need for wider support to address vulnerability was evident, this level of presentation did not fully align with the specific remit of VRU funding. As a result, Medway Council has chosen to embed the A&E Navigator role within its core services and has committed funding for 2026/27.

NHS staff at Medway Hospital praised the team’s work: “The Reachable Moments Team have an amazing impact on our work with young people in the children’s emergency department. They support not just the young people but also nurses and doctors.”



A&E Navigators case studies



Reducing substance related risk

A 17-year-old living in residential care had attended the emergency department multiple times due to seizures linked to heavy cocaine and cannabis use. Staff reported increasing risk-taking behaviours, emotional volatility and frequent missing episodes. His relationship with the residential team had become strained and he was at risk of placement breakdown.

The Reachable Moments youth worker provided calm, consistent support during each hospital attendance, helping him feel heard rather than judged. Through motivational conversations and harm reduction work, he began to recognise the link between his substance use, mental health and physical deteriorations. The youth worker coordinated a multi-agency meeting with the residential home, social worker and VRU worker to create a clearer safety and support structure.

The coordinated plan reduced his missing episodes and stabilised his placement. Residential staff reported an improvement in communication and felt more confident in managing his behaviours. His substance use reduced slightly, and although progress remained gradual, hospital attendances decreased notably.

Providing support after a gang attack

A young man was referred to Reachable Moments following a hospital admission after being assaulted by a local gang of young men. The incident raised significant concerns regarding his safety, emotional wellbeing and vulnerability within the community. These concerns were further intensified by ongoing threats from the group, which reportedly included references to knife crime. This escalation in the nature of the threats contributed to a growing sense of fear and urgency around ensuring his protection and providing him with appropriate emotional support.

It was disclosed that the assault occurred while he was walking his girlfriend home from school. The incident was due to a previous argument with one of the individuals involved, which had recently resurfaced and escalated. He described experiencing a mix of fear and anger – emotions that, at times, have led to thoughts of retaliation. He expressed concern that if he reported anything further, he would be labelled a 'snitch'.

His mother and older sister voiced significant concerns about his safety during the first visit. They emphasized the need for the situation to be addressed and welcomed the involvement of Reachable Moments to provide him with emotional support and guidance. Their hope was that with the right support, he would feel more secure and less inclined to respond with retaliation.

Focused Deterrence helping young people stay safe

Focused Deterrence is a multi-agency strategy aimed at identifying young people aged under-25 involved in a 'young street group' or serious violence and supporting them to desist and stay safe. The deterrence approach combines enforcement, enhanced tailored support and community engagement. Support is co-ordinated across statutory services, where young people are open to services, including adolescent early help, youth services and the voluntary sector. Kent family hubs and Medway youth services provide additional intensive support work for children and young adults.

VRU analysts use multi-agency data to form analytical products that inform and shape the VRU response to serious violence. The monthly Prevent, Protect and Prepare report identifies individuals through intelligence and partnership data that are at risk of criminal exploitation or involvement in gangs or young street groups. The Focused Deterrence approach was delivered for all young street groups scored by the analysts.

The primary outcome of Focused Deterrence is to reduce police-recorded violence against the person, however secondary outcomes include improving the safety of young street group members and the local community. This

includes breaking down group dynamics, reducing feelings of fear and weapon-carrying, improved engagement with professionals, improving self-esteem and sense of purpose, and better engagement in education, employment or training.

This year, four young street groups were identified within Kent, including one that was emerging. Work in collaboration with the county-wide Kent County Council Adolescent Response Team and Social Connections Service, and Community Conferencing, ensured that Focused Deterrence interventions were put in place to provide a long-term reduction of harm to young people and the community by deterring and supporting those individuals from continuing the activity.

Community Conferencing hosted several successful interventions and engagement sessions on anti-social behaviour, culture issues and available support, with groups and the wider community in key areas which led to increased feelings of safety and improved community cohesion. Medway have increased their resilience and ability to engage with the community by training additional staff to undertake community conferencing.



Catch 22 – tackling violence and exploitation

Catch 22 were commissioned jointly by the VRU and the Police and Crime Commissioner as part of his work to tackle violence and exploitation. The service provides one-to-one support to young people up to the age of 25 at risk of child criminal exploitation and county line exploitation in the districts where there are the highest identified risks.

Catch 22 is a national organisation providing both preventative and protective interventions for those at risk of, and those involved in, serious youth violence. Focusing on each young person's individual needs, bespoke programmes are created, with work starting with close relatives and immediate support networks.

Areas covered by the Kent Catch 22 team include Ashford, Canterbury, Maidstone, Medway, Swale, Thanet and West Kent.

This year, 134 referrals have been received by the service.

Total number of young people aged 24 and under reached by Catch 22 this year is 111 (not including pre-existing cases).

They support, on average, 80 to 90 young people at any time. The average age of referral is someone 15-years-old. 90% of referrals are male.

In 2025, Catch 22 facilitated a ground-breaking meeting between the parent of a young person and senior staff at the Home Office, who are overseeing the forthcoming legislation on coerced internal concealment. The discussion provided valuable insights into the mechanisms of exploitation that led young people to internally transport significant quantities of class A drugs, sometimes across international borders. It illuminated the profound and lasting impact on both the individuals and their families. In this case, the family has endured financial hardship, marital breakdown, job loss and enduring psychological trauma.

Referrals by area:

22

Canterbury and Ashford

20

Maidstone and West Kent

44

Medway

11

Swale

23

Thanet

14

Other



Catch 22 case studies

Ending exploitation

A young person was referred by the police due to anti-social behaviour. There were concerns around his relationship with an older male who was exploiting him to sell drugs. The young person did not recognise that he was being exploited.

As a result, the young person's relationship with a parent was being impacted, his emotional wellbeing deteriorated and he was increasingly involved with the police.

The intervention aimed to improve the relationship between the young person and the parent and also encouraged the parent to engage with a local parents' forum.

In time, the young person began to realise that the older person was not his friend and he was being exploited. He stopped the association and getting involved in anti-social behaviour and is now able to make more positive life choices.

The logo for 'Catch 22' is displayed in a stylized, bold font. The word 'catch' is in a smaller, lowercase font above the number '22', which is significantly larger and more prominent. The text is black and is set against a teal triangular background that points to the left.

Ending abuse

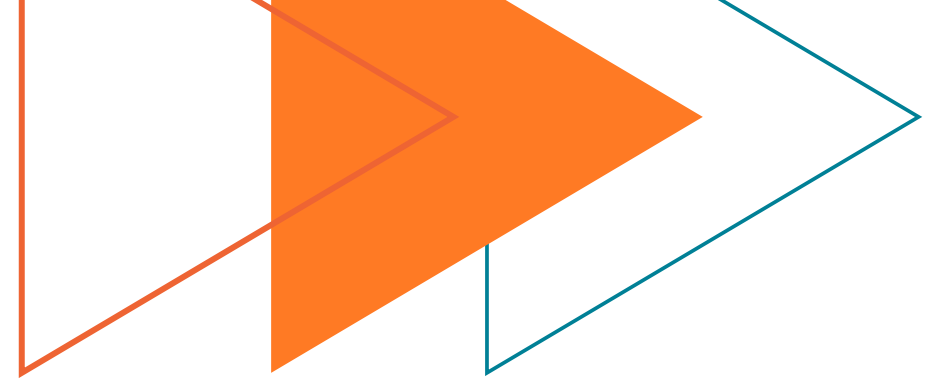
A young person was referred due to concerns around exploitation, sexual assault, missing episodes and running a drug line. The person had been kidnapped for three days and forced to sell drugs in a trap house, finally escaping through a toilet window.

The young person had developed trauma due to the events experienced and relationship struggles with her parents.

The intervention aimed to build trust between the young person and a mentor and offer a safe space to explore all that they had endured. Counselling was put in place as well as support for developing life skills such as budgeting, personal hygiene, interview techniques, healthy relationships/friendships and healthy eating/exercising.

The case is ongoing but progress is being made. The young person recognises that she has been exploited and is working with professionals to process her trauma. She is continuing to meet her mentor on a weekly basis and is talking more about her past experiences.

Turning lives around with Sports Connect



VRU have continued to fund the sports programme with Sports Connect CIC and their partners Sport on Your Doorstep, supporting our work with young people aged 11-24 with a particular focus on those deemed at risk of entering the criminal justice system. The programme works towards reducing offending and raising employment aspirations and opportunities of young people through sport.



Over the year, sports programmes have been delivered in schools and the communities across six districts, mapped as our highest harm wards in terms of youth violence and knife-enabled crime. The provision involved supportive coaching, key engagement and messaging, and ongoing support with coaching and qualifications. The programme delivers bespoke sessions based on the needs of the area and the young people attending. The combination of community-based sessions, school programmes, and targeted outreach work contributed to creating safe, supportive environments where young people felt listened to and empowered. Progression pathways into volunteering and paid roles further strengthened the long-term impact of the programme.

Total number of referrals in 2025/26 were 1,320 (942 for under-18, 21 for aged

19-24, and 15 for over-25, the remaining participants not confirming their age). This year's offering has included school-based programmes, community sessions including pop-ups, family hub sessions and future pathways across six districts.

School-based programmes

School programmes this year have focused on leadership, communication and personal wellbeing, alongside the completion of a multi-sports qualification. Engagement levels have remained consistently high with participants contributing positively and demonstrating creativity and enthusiasm. It has been noted that some young people involved in the schools-based programmes have since attended community sessions, supporting the transition from school engagement into wider community participation.

Sports Connect took part in the Canterbury Back to School initiative in the summer to help support young people transitioning back into secondary education after the summer holidays, while also addressing instances of anti-social behaviour in and around the city centre during after-school hours. The initiative was well received by both young people and partner organisations.

Community sessions including pop-ups

Community sessions have seen gradual growth in attendance with young people demonstrating strong engagement, enthusiasm and willingness to participate.

The summer saw Sports Connect get involved in community-based sessions including the delivery of beach sports at the annual Broadstairs Water Gala,

footgolf, dodgeball and football at Northdown Summer Family Hub Day and Canterbury UASC Community Event that proved so popular the session was extended by an hour.

A pop-up event in Gravesend town centre delivered activities in partnership with Sport on Your Doorstep. The session engaged more than 30 young people, including several girls who tried boxing for the first time and responded very positively. Members of the public commented on the positive impact of providing structured activities for young people in the town centre.

Family hub sessions

Young people play an active role in shaping the family hub sessions, both by leading activities and suggesting sports. The sessions provide a safe and supportive environment, where participants felt comfortable discussing challenges related to home and school life. This aspect of delivery remains a key strength, with young people valuing the opportunity to speak openly with trusted adults. In some instances, due to high demand, positive interaction and active participation, session times have been extended to allow for increased attendance.

Southeastern community programme

Focused co-ordinated safety activities were held at train stations, delivered in a roadshow format. Early engagement has supported the development of progression routes into the local workforce for participating young people. July and August saw a series of coordinated safety and awareness sessions delivered at high-footfall train stations, aligning with peak travel periods and school holidays. These events not only focused on public safety and positive behaviours but also provided immediate signposting to local services, youth provision and career pathways in the rail and transport sectors.

Qualifications and employment including Future Pathways

This year Sports Connect piloted a Department for Work and Pensions employment programme in collaboration with Thanet District Council's 'Active

Thanet' strategy. The programme's aim is to provide support for up to 20 adults, 18-24 years, looking to gain employment. Referrals work with Sports Connect to gain employment opportunities through sports qualifications.

The Sports Connect Future Pathways initiative enables young people to engage with sport, obtain activator and leadership qualifications and progress either to the post-16 future pathway or employment. Participants have an opportunity to become part of the Sports Connect workforce and gain paid employment.

Sports Connect mentors, several of whom have recently gained their qualifications, are now actively working within local education programmes. Their presence is already making an impact, particularly in reaching young people at risk of becoming 'not in employment, education or training'. The number of pre-16 referral cases has continued to rise, reflecting both increased awareness and the relevance of our offer. We are now working strategically with Kent County Council and a cluster of schools to co-design a sector-wide offer that responds to this emerging need.

In Canterbury, we launched our refugee resettlement project, building on the foundations laid by last year's Kent FA Masters project and the Margate Phoenix model in Thanet. The first major event was held on 10 April and brought together 70 participants who took part in football, boccia and cricket. The engagement was excellent throughout, and additional support was provided from Sport on Your Doorstep, delivering boxing sessions.

Our education provision at NorthDown Hub, now fully embedded and supported by both UKSPF and VRU investment, continues to grow. Planning is underway for the launch of new education hubs in Gillingham, Sheerness and Ramsgate.

We have begun preparations for the first year of delivery under the three-year Kent County Council Holiday Activities and Food grant across Swale, Tonbridge and Thanet. Targeted at children eligible for free school meals, the programme includes access to sport, meals and enrichment. Crucially, it also offers qualifications and leadership training for young people aged 14 and over, creating pathways into volunteering and local employment.



Social Skills training



The Social Skills training programme focuses on improving the social and emotional development of children and young people by improving the confidence and skills of the pupil referral unit (PRU) staff working with them. The programme offers a mix of training and staff supervision and this year the scope has been expanded to help provisions think about how to sustain knowledge and practice moving forward.

Community partners who are frequently working with the same young people and families supported by the PRUs have been invited to join the project this year. They have been helped to see beyond the presenting behaviours of a young person and consider underlying causes, identifying the most meaningful way to intervene to improve the young person's social and emotional wellbeing. The aim is to meet the unique needs of each young person as opposed to generic programmes.

As part of the process to sustain knowledge and practice, a series of online workshops, including some external speakers, has been provided to promote a space for shared knowledge and practice-building across agencies. The resource bank has moved to a new, more accessible platform allowing staff to easily share best practice. An audit tool is now available for schools to update and monitor.

Staff supervision spaces have continued to focus on staff wellbeing as well as requests for learning and formulation of specific young people and behaviours and how they might tailor interventions to meet individual need.

In 2025/26, 59 referrals were received for social skills training and staff supervision has reached more than 130 professionals.



Buddi tags

The Buddi Tag programme has continued to operate throughout the year as an early intervention tool to help young people avoid exploitation, reduce criminal behaviours and stay on track with positive goals. A Buddi tag is a GPS monitoring device which is attached to the ankle of a person and can be done so by anyone who has been trained and not just police.

This year, tags have been deployed to assist/deter 48 young people from anti-social behaviour, violence, drug/alcohol misuse, risk of exploitation and missing episodes.

The GPS Buddi Tag National Working Group continues to grow covering topics such as step-down and exit plans, how to populate analytical reports to support parents/guardians and the College of Policing practice bank submission, the use of other devices to support individuals along with any other learning and best practice.

Kent continues to lead the way on navigating and teaching other policing areas on how to implement tags for these cohorts of individuals. The project has been evaluated by Kent University and has been published on the [College of Policing website](#).

Buddi tag case study

Another police force notified us that a young person, currently under investigation for multiple offences relating to drugs supply, had moved to Kent looking for a new start. Due to previous concerns around exploitation, the young person was wearing one of their Buddi tags. Kent used this transfer as an opportunity to engage with the individual, offering to provide a Kent VRU Buddi tag, maintaining ongoing support for him and his family. The swap was accepted and has enabled the young person to build a positive relationship with local officers.



Safer Knives Replacement Scheme

The VRU's Safer Knife Replacement Scheme (SKRS) has been evolving throughout the year. The scheme is used in homes or locations where young people may take possession of knives and offers support to them to discourage them from knife carrying. It offers an opportunity to exchange pointed knives for rounded-end knives.

The VRU has been busy working to improve the SKRS and has linked in with a national working group to extend our efforts. In the latest inspection of Kent Police by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), the force was scored 'good' and SKRS highlighted for its 'innovative practice'. At the time of the inspection, 107 young people had been involved in the scheme and 573 knives had been exchanged for a safer alternative. In May 2025, the scheme was shared nationally as good practice and published on the College of Policing practice bank.

This scheme is part of a national campaign to educate the public about the choice to use safer designed knives. We have worked with the Ben Kinsella Foundation, Leanne Lucas of Let's Be Blunt, Leisa Nichols-Drew from De Montfort University and trauma surgeon Duncan Bew to help promote the message of using rounded-end knives, including speaking at the Reducing Knife Harm Conference as part of the Safer Knives Group in November 2025.

Our campaign work is based on promoting these key messages:

- Round-ended knives are scientifically proven to be safer – they cannot penetrate fabric but can still be used for kitchen tasks
- It is easy to make the swap – round-ended knives are available online at Viners, The Range, Amazon and Ocado delivery
- People can dispose of pointed knives safely in recycling centres
- If anyone is worried about domestic abuse, weapon carrying or violence in the home, school or business, our violence reduction team can support with a safer knife swap
- Let us create a safer community together – joining schools, families and organisations across Kent and Medway who are already making their spaces safer.



Serving up educational activities with the ‘commando chef’

Colour Sergeant Mike Beaton MBE of the Royal Marines Educational Awareness Team, known as the ‘commando chef’ has used the power of cooking to engage people in Kent and Medway, including students, young people and others caught carrying knives. The commando chef has visited schools this year and delivered sessions to police officers and adults in a community cafe.

He has made it onto the College of Policing practice bank and they were keen to see him in action and visited schools with us to capture his sessions. CSGT Mike Beaton MBE was not only helping educate young people, but supporting the VRU in spreading our message around the Safer Knife Replacement Scheme and rounded-end knives.

In between his sessions with the VRU, he was invited to see King Charles III at Buckingham Palace. This included meeting the Prime Minister, Home Secretary, actor Idris Elba and working group representatives on reducing knife crime, attending the event with our Safer Knife Replacement pack and information.

Communications

The VRU has built upon the development of its communications strategy with a year of carefully developed campaigns and content generation, to help spread the violence reduction far and wide.

With the strategy in place, setting out our key messaging and target audiences, we have been able to develop a number of campaigns across traditional and digital media. These campaigns have been informed by the views of young people and have often featured young people in photographs and video.

We have continued to develop content on our website including explanatory content, case studies, news and events and campaign materials. Our work has been advanced in partnership with the Blue Lozenge strategic communications agency which has specialist expertise in the public sector/not-for-profit sector.



Listening to the voice of young people

The VRU has been involved in a number of methods over the year to better understand the views of young people in informing our work with partners and to help make our streets safer.

Engagement work has included a strategic needs assessment survey and focus groups, a safeguarding children partnership safety survey, a Families First/Kent Youth Voice survey, the Big Mental Health Conversation and other project work.

All the work was designed to understand what helps young people feel safe, what worries them, and what changes they want to see in their communities. Responses came from young people aged 11 to 24. Living in every district of Kent and Medway.

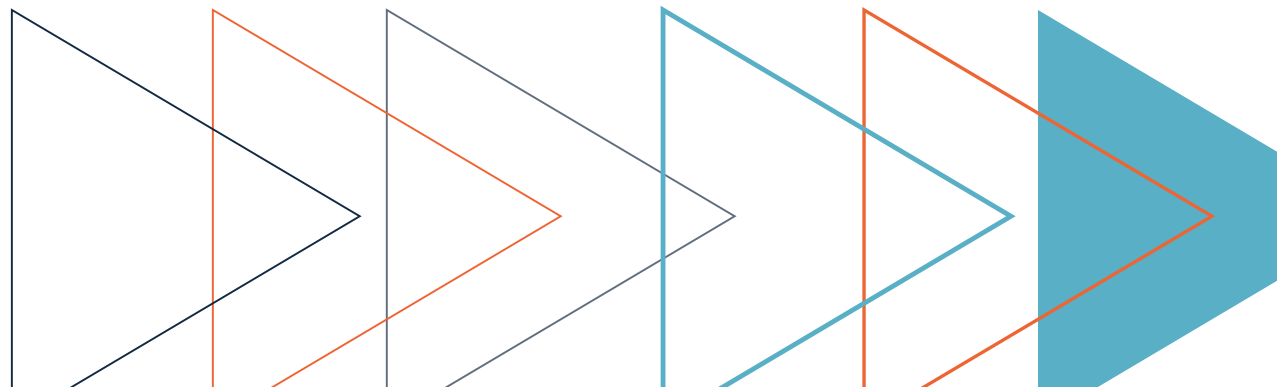
We heard that family, friends and trusted adults are the biggest source of reassurance, environmental factors like bright lighting, CCTV and busy areas help young people feel more secure, with a police presence adding a sense of protection. Home, pets and hobbies provide comfort and emotional safety, while other important factors include supportive teachers, reliable transport and privacy.

Young people identified several factors that contribute to feeling unsafe in Kent and Medway. Harassment is the most common worry, followed by anti-social behaviour and knife crime.

Drug and alcohol misuse and factors such as visible litter strongly impact feelings of safety. Weapons beyond knives (for example, catapults) and large groups of teenagers add to the feelings of intimidation. Additional factors such as poor lighting and face coverings can increase vulnerability. Other concerns include being alone, unsafe routes, school settings, uncontrolled animals, fires, hateful graffiti, violence, peer pressure and fear of strangers or crowds.

The top priorities among young people to make Kent and Medway safer were removing drunk or drug-taking individuals from town centres and ending harassment towards girls and women. A bigger police presence and better relationships with the public were strongly emphasised.

Young people called for safe spaces for teenagers and discouraging face coverings was mentioned as a way to reduce fear.



Evaluations

1. Cordis Bright

An evaluation by the independent consultancy Cordis Bright in July 2025 found:

“The VRU has become a valued part of the Kent and Medway system and contributed to positive progress in improving responses to violence, through working in ways partners find effective and incorporating several pillars of a public health approach to violence in their process.

“Across these, they have embedded a culture of learning and adaptation and have capitalised on synergies between different activities and work strands. Several supporting factors and enablers have played a role, which provide useful learning for future delivery and similar efforts elsewhere.

“... It is also helping to strengthen partnership working and data-sharing and analysis in the system, building the case for this way of working and demonstrating public health principles.”



catch 22



2. Reviews of Sports Connect and Catch-22

The VRU needs to ensure our services are accountable and effective. We worked with external evaluators, Cordis Bright, who engaged with our partners at Sports Connect and Catch-22 over the financial year. This ensured continual learning, growth and demonstrates how the VRU and its partners adapt to the needs of our strategy.



Turning the Tide on Knife Crime Together conference

More than 150 delegates from across the UK attended a major conference hosted by the VRU in March 2026 aimed at reducing knife crime and keeping young people safe.

The 'Turning the Tide on Knife Crime Together' conference at Kent Police College brought together policing, health, education, youth services, charities, community organisations and families with lived experience – all united by a shared commitment to tackling knife crime and violence.

Speakers included Patrick Green from the Ben Kinsella Trust, Duncan Bew of King's College Hospital, Pooja Kanda OBE, Ronan's Law campaigner, and Leanne Lucas who has launched the Let's Be Blunt campaign calling for blunted rather than pointed-tip knives.

Delegates heard of the significant progress being made in Kent and Medway, where knife crime has reduced by 17% and serious violence by 19%, and the contributions of innovative practice and partnership working to help achieve this.



Across three interactive sessions, several themes emerged highlighting the importance of early intervention, from primary age engagement to supporting parents and families, and the need to reduce access to weapons. In addition, the spotlight was placed on harnessing people's lived experience in shaping strategy and plans and the importance of engaging with young people. The discussion also focused on calls for improved partnership working and the importance of public messaging and addressing the influence of online content.

Delegates were asked to state what 'success would look like' by 2027 and agreed that this vision would include fewer victims and fewer deaths; safer, more hopeful communities; better education and earlier support; and improved collaboration.

Feedback has been very positive, with delegates describing the event as 'impactful', 'brilliant', 'exceptional' and 'very moving'.

The VRU would like to thank all those involved in the conference for their contributions and ongoing commitment to keeping communities safe.



YOU TOGETHER
HERE

Panel Q&A

LET'S BE BLUNT

REMOVE THE POINT



NHS

King's College Hospital
NHS Foundation Trust

Uprising

Medway
COUNCIL





Kent Fire & Rescue Service



Kent Police

