THAMES VALLEY VIOLENCE PREVENTION PARTNERSHIP

WHAT WORKS

Operation Paramount

'It's just something we live with, it's part of our story now' – exploring the impact of parental incarceration on the family; a pilot interview study with mothers, carers, and children

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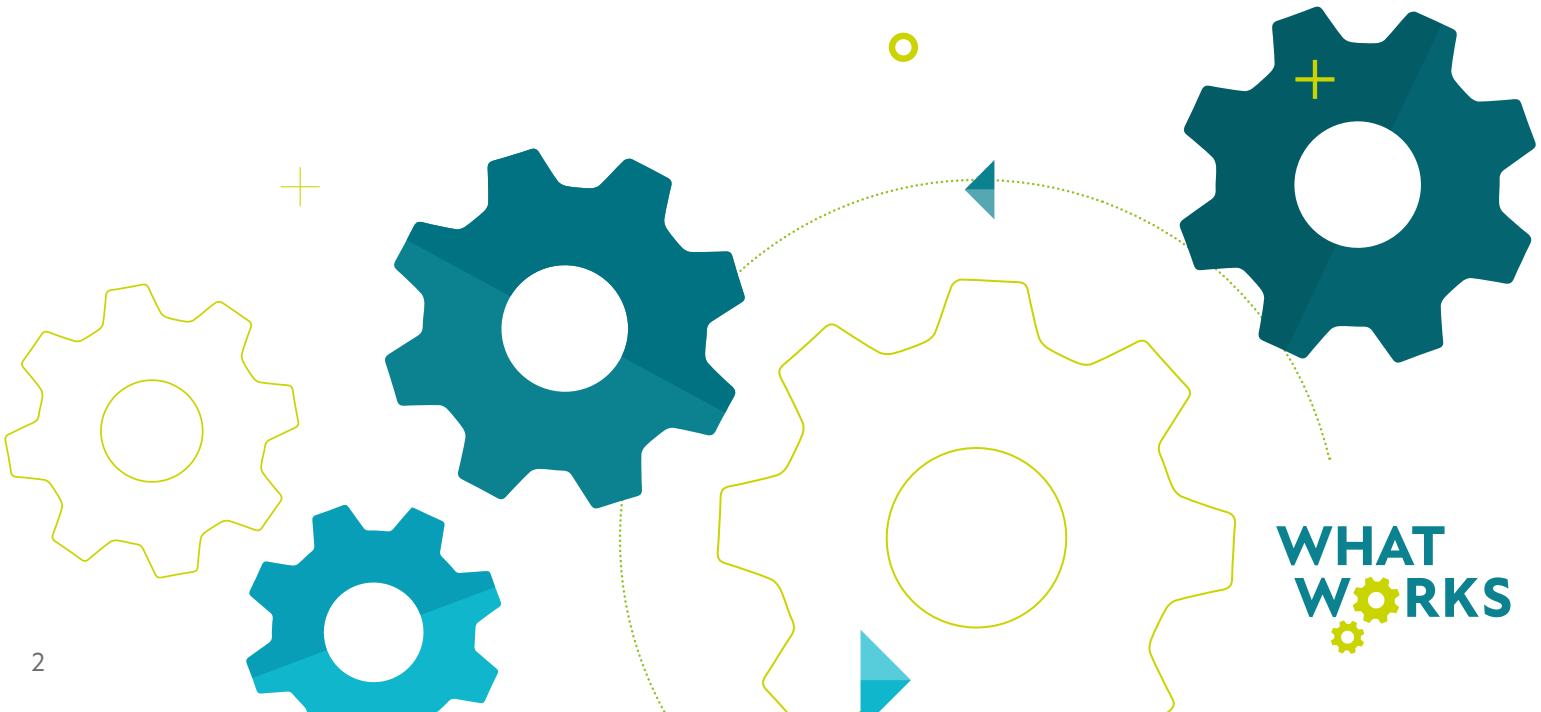
What is the What Works Series?

Welcome to Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership's "**What Works**" series; a collection of publications which present the results from our intervention evaluations and relevant pieces of research.

- A key role of the Violence Prevention Partnership programme is to invest our Home Office grant into the testing of new intervention approaches; funding not only their delivery in our local areas but to run robust evaluations of those interventions, adding to the evidence base around what works in preventing violence.
- We aim to gather evidence on the effectiveness and impact of interventions in preventing or reducing violence. That evidence is then played back to our local partnership systems to provide learning, and to inform the system change that is needed if we are to shift our focus towards higher impact intervention and diversion approaches.
- Our evaluations and research also contribute to a growing national evidence base, through formal academic publication and sharing with bodies such as the Youth Endowment Fund and the wider network of Violence Reduction Units (VRUs).
- Each of our interventions has been through a rigorous research and design phase, using our Research Project Lifecycle which puts in place a structure around which the highest quality of research projects can be designed and run. The Lifecycle ensures that interventions are based on quality ideas, knowledge of the existing evidence, analysis of data relating to cohort design and expected caseload, and well-documented design decisions. This ensures that the way that we implement and deliver the intervention is consistent, and enables us to deliver the right test of an intervention that is based on evidence, and that can actually be implemented in the real world. This also allows us to run multiple concurrent Randomised Control Trials (RCT), the gold standard approach to determining what works.
- Through the Thames Valley "What Works" series of publications, we provide all our partners with an accessible, yet complete, summary of key findings from our research. We aim to identify next steps and to assist in identifying how the learning could be applied to wider local services, to support that longer term, sustainable approach to preventing and reducing violence in our communities.
- For clarity, this is our local approach and is separate to other "what works" approaches being undertaken by other bodies, such as the Youth Endowment Fund. Although we will be sharing our evaluations accordingly to contribute to the wider evidence base.



Introduction

Thames Valley Police and Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership (formerly VRU) jointly launched Operation Paramount in the winter of 2021. Operation Paramount is the first statutory data-led recognition system for children affected by parental imprisonment.

It accesses reception data from prisons across England and Wales and analyses it against other statutory systems within a secure data environment to discover parental links to children within the Thames Valley. These children are then offered support by a police officer as part of Operation Paramount, via their remaining parent/carer, from the charity Children Heard and Seen.

In the UK, about 75,000 individuals in prison report having parental responsibility. With prison populations expected to rise, this number will likely increase. Parental incarceration can have both practical and emotional consequences for children, such as financial hardship at home, developmental impact, and increased mental health or substance use disorders.

In recognition of these challenges, in 2017 the UK Ministry of Justice acknowledged parental imprisonment as a public health issue. Lord Farmer's investigation into the role of family connections in reducing the generational impact of parental incarceration identified gaps in the prison system's support for families. His report recommended identifying children of incarcerated parents routinely to provide early support.

A 2019 report on children of prisoners by Crest Advisory highlighted the absence of national guidance to identify children of prisoners as a vulnerable group, and suggested that police and other agencies take steps to identify these children. In response, a pathway was established by the Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership, in collaboration with local police. This pathway identifies incarcerated adults identified as parents through data links, and offers support to their families, specifically in partnership with the charity Children Heard and Seen, to help mitigate the potential harm to children caused by parental imprisonment.

In this pilot study four mothers/female kinship carers were interviewed in Autumn 2024. Nine charity-led short interviews with children, three girls and six boys aged between 6 and 12 years, were also included. This study anticipated, and informed, the larger natural experiment to evaluate the pathway.

This qualitative pilot study aimed to answer the following experiential questions:

- **to explore carers experience of the impact on their family of parental incarceration**
- **to discuss what support has been helpful in relation to the impact of parental incarceration**
- **to identify what support could have been/be useful in mitigating any negative impact of this event.**

These findings are presented in this report.

Further objectives were:

- **to 'test' the interview schedule**
- **to develop a framework for analysis of a larger dataset**

These further objectives informed the conduct of the qualitative element of the Operation Paramount Natural Experiment.

Key findings Summary

- Mothers and carers described long histories of challenging circumstances before the father's incarceration
- For the mothers and carers interviewed, the incarceration of an abusive partner brought a sense of relief and stability for the family
- The manner in which an arrest is carried out had a distinct impact on the children
- The prolonged length of time between arrest and trial led to further challenge, and in some cases risk, for the family
- Mothers and carers described the ongoing challenge of providing age-appropriate explanations for the situation to their children
- There was a tendency to be reactive rather than proactive regarding information giving, which can lead to children not understanding the situation
- The children's emotional response may manifest in behavioural challenges, such as acting out at home or at school
- As a result of parental incarceration older children may take on more responsibilities within the family
- A prevailing concern was not knowing when the partner would be released and the in-ability to manage consequent risk to their family
- Social services' involvement was minimal, focusing only on physical risk to the children
- Schools were generally seen as a stable and supportive environment for children
- However, schools sometimes failed to connect behavioural issues with the children's home situation
- Children Heard and Seen was the most frequently mentioned support agency, providing extensive assistance to families
- Other services such as play therapy, Early Help, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) were also noted as beneficial within the support network

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Methodology

A convenience sample of participants was identified through a Children Heard and Seen organised residential event. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken, one to one, in-person, and audio-recorded. Separate from the research study, as part of the charity activity, children attending the event were interviewed by charity staff, with their mother/carer present, about their opinions and feelings about the police, and what the charity provides.

A deductive framework was used to identify challenges and enablers for families with an incarcerated parent. This study was approved by the Oxford Brookes HLS ethics committee, reference 241845:7/10/24. The paper was also reviewed by a representative of Children Heard and Seen to ensure participant anonymity.

Findings

For these families all incarcerated parents were fathers who had received sentences of between 18 months and 15 years. At the time of interview these fathers had either just gone to prison; had been in prison and released for some time; or were still in prison.

Impact on Children

Relief and stability

For some families, the incarceration of an abusive partner or father brought relief and stability:

> ***'A lot of pressure was lifted because he was found guilty and also the fact that he wasn't let out of prison, because I was the one who made the report so I feared for my life and my children's lives.'***

Despite the calm, the children do, however, experience emotional distress - including grief, confusion, and a sense of loss. The suddenness of a parent's incarceration, especially when it was unexpected, left children struggling to comprehend the change in their family dynamics:

> ***'When daddy was in prison, I kept on coming into the kitchen when mummy was in there and I was crying because I didn't get to see daddy any more.' (child)***

The impact of arrest

The arrest itself was a pivotal moment. The manner in which the arrest was carried out had a clear impact on the children. Accounts from both mothers and children illustrate the trauma that arises from aggressive police arrest tactics, such as using force to enter the home, or where children are woken in the middle of the night:

> ***'My youngest he was only two, he was hysterically crying...and they wouldn't let me anywhere near him.'***
>
> ***'We were scared because we didn't know what was happening...' (child)***

A calmer, more 'cooperative' arrest had less of an emotional impact on the children:

> ***'They parked round the corner from the house, he was never really officially arrested, they asked him to come down to the station. From his part he was very co-operative as well which helped. So, they never had to make a scene, or use any force which if he hadn't been co-operative, it may have been different. So that's kind of both parties working alongside each other I suppose.'***

Age-appropriate explanations

Mothers and carers described the challenge of providing age-appropriate explanations for the situation. For younger children they gave simpler explanations such as: *'Daddy made a thumbs down bad choice'.*

As children grow older, the level of detail in explanations increases:

> ***'I mean my daughter's getting older and we're going to have to have that conversation a bit more, but just, slowly...we have little conversations like, we'll go for a walk and she'll say...and I'll think oh OK here we go!!'***

This is an ongoing challenge as children get older and their understanding and questions change. Children can come out with something unexpected further down the line, something they saw or felt at the time, not yet shared. For example, one mother was saddened to hear her child's reflection on the arrest situation in their interview: *'they treated my mum like she was the criminal.'*

Mothers/carers needed to balance the timing of their explanations with the children's developmental readiness. This can be difficult, and there was a tendency to be reactive rather than proactive regarding information giving. Therefore, if children do not ask questions, they may remain uncertain about their parent's absence. One young person said in their interview they were still not sure 'why they took him'.

Emotional and behavioural responses

Younger children may not have the emotional vocabulary or coping mechanisms to express their frustration, confusion, or anger, verbally. As a result, these emotions may manifest in behavioural issues such as acting out at home or at school – one mother/carer described:

> ***'And it went from screaming and shouting at family, to screaming and shouting at friends and teachers, and so it escalated massively.'***

Older children might be able to reflect on the actions of the police or the circumstances leading up to the arrest. However, they may still struggle with emotions as they explore new perspectives on the situation. For example, one child reflected in interview on why the police didn't act sooner, and why they had acted in the way they did:

> ***'She called them like 20 times. if they had done something sooner she wouldn't have got that upset and that hurt by it. And he wouldn't have done worse things.'***

As a result of parental incarceration older children may take on more responsibilities within the family. Older siblings may step into caregiving roles for younger siblings. For example, offering suggestions about how traumatic events, like an arrest, could be managed to spare younger children from witnessing it:

> ***'I feel that they should make sure that the kids can't see because it can be quite traumatic particularly for young kids to see someone they care about being arrested.'***

Impact on Mothers and Carers

Cumulative Life Events

Mothers and carers spoke of long histories of challenging circumstances before the father's incarceration; including domestic violence, coercion, and drug abuse. Whilst the incarceration of their partner was significant, it was often one event, and frequently a welcome event, in difficult lives.

Emotional Work

Some mothers were key in their partner's arrest, and were grappling with moral conflict, yet fear of retaliation. For one mother, a violent incident that involved the children was pivotal in reporting him to the police:

> ***'He ended up beating me in front of the children. The boys were in the room. I tried to drag him out but I couldn't – I was half the size I am now! He went to the gym five times a week so... there was no comparison... that was the moment.'***

Extended periods between arrest and trial left families in emotional limbo, and responsible for managing the father's continued presence:

> ***'I was the supervisor when he was with the children, as he couldn't be alone with them. It was all very messy with social services – they were like these are the criteria, he can't be alone with them - they were like right this is what you've got to do and kind of left us to it...'***

The stress of managing day-to-day life in this *'new normal'* is compounded by processing the various aspects of the event - the betrayal of the partner of themselves/their children, a dramatic arrest situation, the father's absence, or continued managed presence:

> ***'I've learned to be quite disconnected... I'm just like right, let's put this hat on, and I become quite robotic, and that can come across that I'm not really emotionally engaged...'***

A prevailing concern was the uncertainty of when the partner would be released and the consequent risk to their family:

> ***'I need to know when he's coming out, whether he's doing a half, three quarters, his whole sentence, cause I need to prepare her and I cannot prepare her when I don't know when he's coming out.'***

Judgement and stigma

Mothers and carers often had to disclose the situation repeatedly to schools or other institutions, facing judgment or bureaucratic confusion about safeguarding procedures. One mother/carer described a complicated ongoing situation regarding the children's father's attendance at a sports club. The father had served his sentence and was deemed as no risk by court and social care. However, the situation became known to the club and she was berated for not declaring it, and undergoing club safeguarding scrutiny. She laments the lack of consideration for the children's mental well-being through their father not being allowed to be involved in their activities:

> ***'You haven't looked at the bigger picture of it and the impact it could have on his children of him not being able to stand on the sideline and watch his kids kick a ball. I mean, what do you think he's going to do?'***

Contact with the offending parent

Managing ongoing contact between children and the incarcerated parent involved significant planning by mothers and carers. They also spoke of the financial and time costs of visits, along with emotional doubts about whether contact was beneficial. In some cases, maintaining contact with an abusive parent was seen as potentially harmful for the children and therefore kept to a minimum:

> ***'She has a christmas card, and she has a birthday card from him, but that's me, keeps him in the loop, without being too much.'***

Systems and Support

Police

The police's handling of arrests varied significantly. One mother described a calm, plain-clothed visit, while another described a traumatic experience with armed police, leading to distress for her children:

> ***'So, it was armed police that arrested my ex-partner, and I would say they were very power happy, trigger happy. They've taken the front door off, they've arrested him. They're not letting me anywhere near my children.'***

The children also expressed a desire for kinder treatment during arrests, highlighting the emotional trauma caused:

> ***'Be kinder to the children during the arrest, and stop shouting a lot.'***

Family Court

Family courts offered some relief by setting clear boundaries for abusive parent's contact with the children, with one mother describing the validation of having the court recognise coercive control:

> ***'And actually, the judge in the family court during one of the hearings put something in place that he can't take me to court for the next five years I think. The judge recognised that this was just a method of coercive control over me ... So that was very validating'.***

Conversely, another mother found family court to be unsympathetic, especially when they were unable to attend hearings due to fear of their abusive partner:

> ***'I really bottled one court case, and it was 'failure to turn up to court' and it's like you've heard the voice notes and how terrified I am of this man, can you help?'***

Social work support

Some mothers felt relief when social services did not get involved, or when their social worker actively advocated for them, such as contacting the prison service to get information on the father's release date. Others felt that social services' involvement was minimal, only focusing on physical risk during visits, and then closing the case once the father was imprisoned. One mother felt that the social worker was indifferent to her children's mental health:

> ***'And that was very much sod their mental health and the long-term effects.'***

School

Schools were generally seen as a stable and supportive environment for children. Despite personal challenges, many children continued to perform well academically. Schools were accommodating, allowing children to miss school for visits with their incarcerated parent. Schools also played an instrumental role in referring to support services such as play therapy, CAMHS, and charities that specialise in supporting families affected by parental incarceration.

Schools sometimes failed to connect behavioural issues with the children's home situation. If children displayed challenging behaviours at school due to emotional distress, this led to suspension or exclusion, further isolating them from the supportive environment of school:

> ***'(Child) excels he is very, very bright....considering how much school he missed last year because he was excluded because of the problems.'***

Mothers and carers also expressed concern over their situation becoming known in school, with fears of being bullied or ostracised by peers:

> ***'There is always this worry that somebody's going to find out, and bullying, or they don't want to be associated with them...and it's like, they haven't done anything wrong.'***

Support Agencies

Children Heard and Seen was the most frequently mentioned support agency, providing extensive assistance to families. Other services such as play therapy, Early Help, and CAMHS were also noted as part of the support network.

The charity helped with practical issues like finances, navigating the legal system, and providing psychological support. This included guidance for mothers/carers on how to speak to their children about the situation. The charity provided safe, non-judgmental spaces for both children and mothers/carers, including one-on-one support, peer group sessions, and residential events. The residential events created an environment where children could be themselves without the need to explain their family situation, reducing feelings of isolation and fostering friendships with peers facing similar challenges:

> ***'When the kids come here to the residentials, it's that big safe space that the kids have got. And half the time the kids don't even talk about it, they're just here to have fun together. They don't have to watch themselves if they do say why ain't your dad here, why ain't your mum here...it's just the norm in this setting. No-ones going to look at you as if you've got six heads!'***

> ***'It's nice to know other people like the same as you because at school there's no one really around you that would understand, and they just kind of look at you different... but at residentials you can find friends in like similar situations' (child)***

The charity also facilitated positive interactions with the police, providing reparation for children affected by their parents' arrest:

> ***'They've (police officers) comforted us, and talked to us about what we saw and how it was. When some policemen come (here) I asked a policeman am I allowed in the police car and put on the sirens and wear a hat and he says, yeah. And we have a lot of fun with my friends and my (siblings).'***

What does this mean?

- This small, exploratory study challenges the assumption that parental imprisonment always disrupts families. In some cases, the imprisonment of a coercive or violent partner brings stability.
- Parental arrest can come at the end of a long history of coercion, violence, drug use etc. all of which will have a negative impact on children. Such cumulative life events should be recognised and considered when supporting families experiencing parental incarceration.
- An aggressive, unexpected arrest can prove traumatic for all, and especially children. It is vital for police to 'think child/ren' within such situations: including considerations of communication, explanation, and reparation around the event.
- Giving age-appropriate explanation is an ongoing challenge for the remaining parent/carer. There is a tendency to be reactive rather than proactive in information giving, which can leave children with unanswered questions. Statutory support agencies and CHaS support can support families in proactively engaging with the children around the situation in an age-appropriate way.
- Children can take on roles that would typically be associated with adult support such as protecting their mother from further upset, or caring for younger siblings. Such 'adultification' is part of many of the children's lives, and should be acknowledged, with appropriate support offered.
- The study also highlights the question of whether maintaining contact with an incarcerated parent is always beneficial, particularly when that parent has been violent, as it may cause additional stress for the children. This troubles the general move towards facilitating contact with an incarcerated parent.
- Uncertainty of release dates led to additional stress for mothers/carers about when and how to prepare their children for the possible re-presence of their father/step-father, and concerns over possible violence. Communication with families, and social services by the prison service would go some way to mitigate the possible associated risk and impact.
- Social work support was short-term and focused on physical risk. The raising of thresholds for social service intervention has led to a decrease in preventive support. Families are increasingly relying on charities, schools, or ad-hoc support, instead of consistent professional help from social care services. Investment in Early Help services could lead to the provision of consistent 'named' support for families experiencing parental incarceration.
- School was consistently viewed as supportive and a positive environment for children. On occasion there was a lack of joined up thinking in relation to life events and behaviour. There is a need for cross school approaches in supporting children affected by parental incarceration.
- The role of support agencies is key, notably Children Heard and Seen, alongside Early Help, and CAMHS. A joined-up multiagency support approach can be an effective safety-net for families as they navigate the impact of parental incarceration on their lives.

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Strengths and Limitations

The small sample size of this study was effective in testing an interview schedule and data analysis framework. However, due to the small sample size, despite some commonalities, analysis findings should not be transferred to other families where there is a parent in prison. All participating families were in active receipt of support from Children Heard and Seen and therefore may be representative of families with more challenging life events for which they are seeking support.

Authors and Referencing

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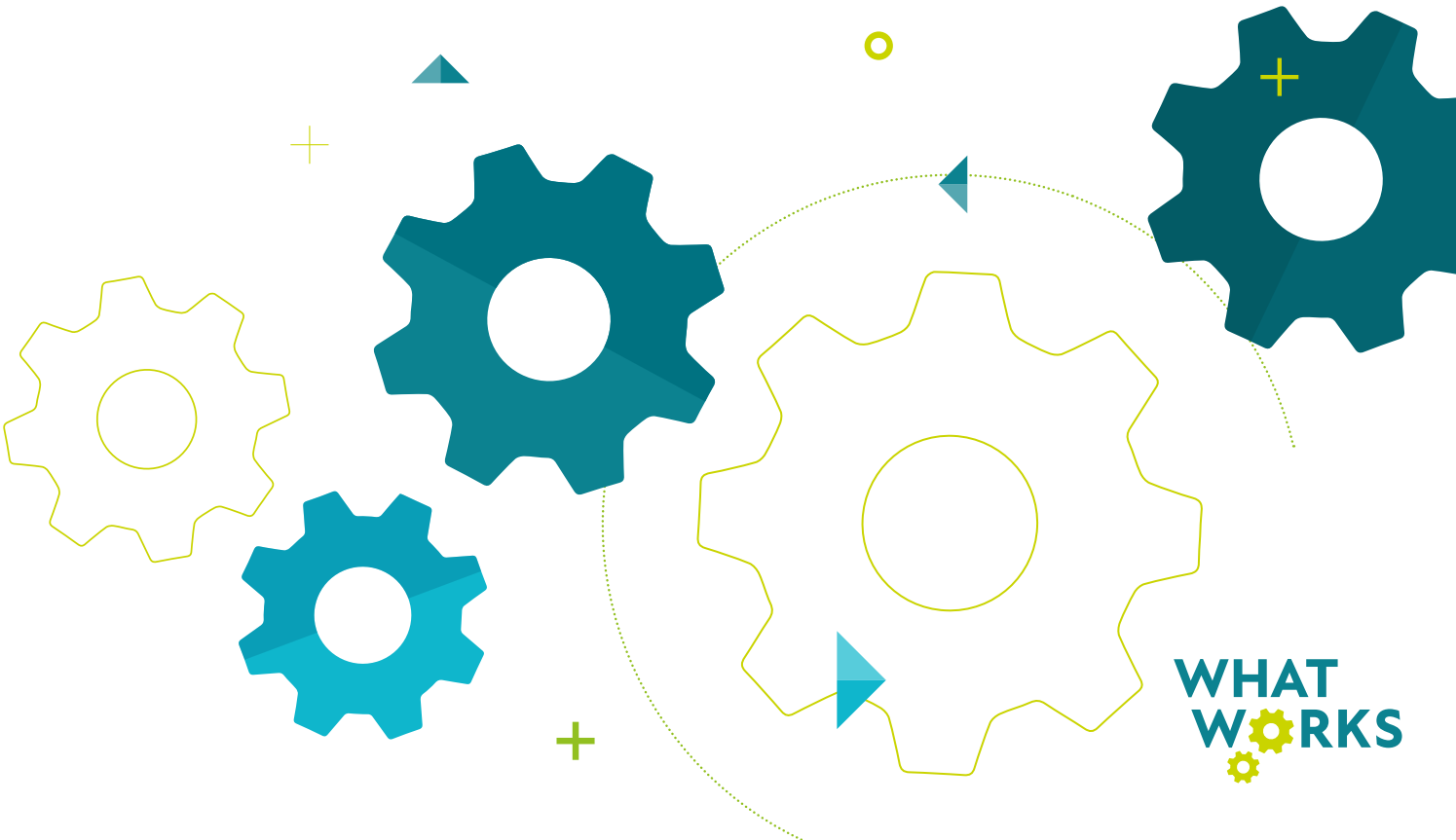
Contact Us

If you have any questions please contact the core programme team via **vpp@thamesvalley.police.uk**

Our website has information on all our projects and evaluations. **www.tvvpp.co.uk**

You can also follow us on X/Twitter **@TV_VPP**



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