

The Thames Valley Operation Paramount Toolkit

A toolkit to assist in local implementation of a pathway
to recognise and offer support to children and families
affected by parental imprisonment



Overview

The Operation Paramount Toolkit is designed to support professionals and partner agencies in the recognition and offer of support for children and families affected by parental imprisonment.

Drawing on insights from the Thames Valley Police Operation Paramount initiative, the toolkit aims to:

- Operationalise best practices for early recognition of affected children through data-led and relational approaches.
- Set out a potential blueprint for multi-agency collaboration based on a tried and tested model between the police and a third-sector organisation.
- Provide practical guidance for setting up systems and roles to enable timely, trauma-informed, and non-stigmatising support.

Contents

Background	4
Theory of change based on the Thames Valley Operation Paramount model	8
Outcomes	10
Theoretical framework	11
Implementation	12
Key Staff Roles and Responsibilities	14
Resources checklists	16
Implementation checklists	19
Acknowledgements and Referencing	24

Background

Parental imprisonment is a recognised Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) associated with increased risks of emotional, behavioural, educational, and social difficulties for children. However, the impact remains poorly understood due to a lack of mechanisms to systematically identify children affected by parental incarceration across statutory services. Without formal recognition, children affected are often invisible to support systems, leading to missed opportunities for early intervention, emotional support, and safeguarding input.

Operation Paramount was launched jointly by Thames Valley Police and the Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership (formerly the Violence Reduction Unit) in winter 2021. This is the first statutory data-led system in England and Wales aimed at identifying children affected by parental imprisonment.

Operation Paramount uses prison reception data cross-referenced with other statutory data sources to identify children linked to incarcerated parents within Thames Valley. This enables focused support to be offered to the families by the police to specific third sector support (in Thames Valley this is the charity Children Heard and Seen).

This pathway addresses a major gap in system-wide recognition and support for children of incarcerated parents. By leveraging data and a proactive outreach model, Operation Paramount has demonstrated potential for improving access to care, reducing stigma, and informing future child welfare strategies.

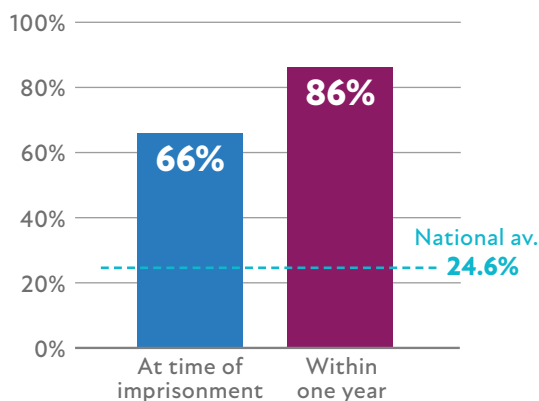
Underpinning Evidence

Three studies were undertaken to evaluate this pathway.

Statistical Analysis

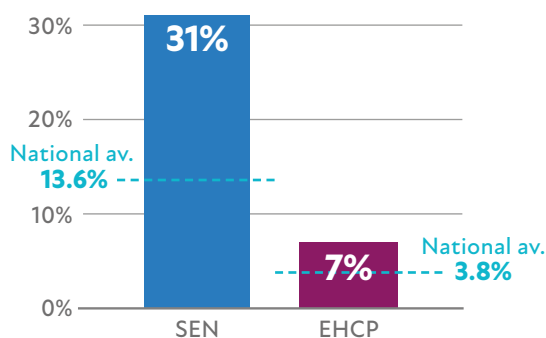
This study analysed 225 children (106 girls, 119 boys) in Oxfordshire identified through Operation Paramount between November 2021 and November 2024, drawing on joint shared data with Oxfordshire County Council under a separate memorandum of understanding.

Free school meals



66% of the cohort were already in receipt of free school meals (FSM) at the time of imprisonment, rising to 86% within one year, compared with a national eligibility rate of 24.6%.

Educational support



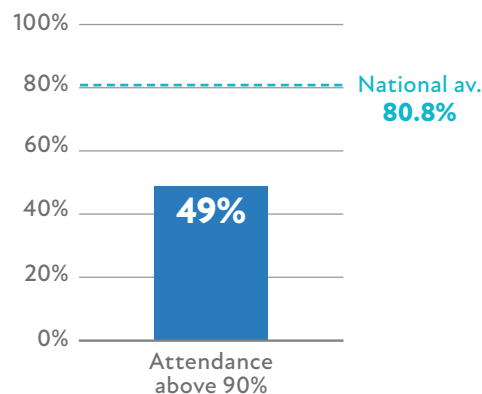
31% of children were receiving Special Educational Needs support and 7% had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) at the point of imprisonment, more than double national rates of 13.6% and 3.8% respectively.

Suspension rate

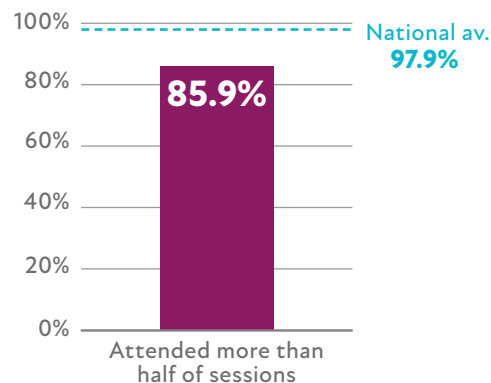
Despite these higher needs, the 4.3% suspension rate was identical to the national average, suggesting no greater behavioural challenges.

4.3%

School attendance

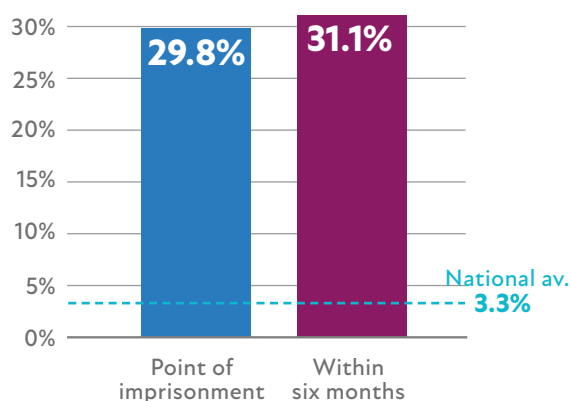


Only 49% of the cohort had attendance above 90% during the term of imprisonment, compared with 80.8% nationally.



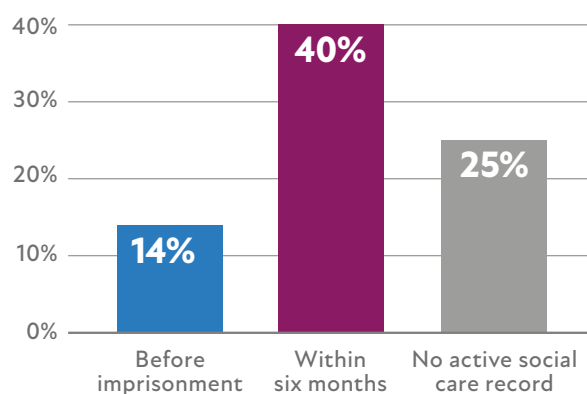
Severe absence was also more common: only 85.9% attended more than half of sessions, against a national figure of 97.9%. Absence rates worsened in the term before and during parental incarceration.

Social care



29.8% of children were on statutory social care plans at Child in Need level or above at the point of imprisonment, rising slightly to 31.1% within six months, compared with 3.3% nationally.

MASH referrals



Referrals to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) grew from 14% before imprisonment to 40% within six months, though 25% of children had no active social care record at all.

▶ **Together, these findings show that children of imprisoned parents experience greater poverty, higher educational needs, poorer attendance, and increased safeguarding concerns, requiring focused support**

Natural Experiment

Operation Paramount, launched in 2021, is the UK's first data-led statutory system for identifying children affected by parental imprisonment. By securely linking prison reception data with statutory datasets, it allows early recognition of children at risk and offers them tailored support via Children Heard and Seen.

Findings:

- Recognition: the system revealed children previously unrecognised as impacted by parental imprisonment.
- Incarcerated fathers typically left mothers as primary carers.
- Incarcerated mothers often led to care by non-parental guardians, with children more likely to enter the care system.
- 20% of eligible families accepted support (vs. 13% in non-rollout areas).
- On second offer, two-thirds of families requested support, showing delayed readiness and the value of re-offering support.
- Needs Identified:

47% requested support for children

32% for the remaining carer

21% for legal support

▶ **This study demonstrated proof of concept for a scalable, ethical data-matching approach that addresses the historic invisibility of such children in statutory systems.**

Qualitative Interview Study

This study involved interviews with mothers, kinship carers, and children affected by parental imprisonment to explore lived experiences, support gaps, and service effectiveness.

Findings:

Emotional Impact on Carers:

- Incarceration of an abusive partner often brought relief and stability.
- Carers reported isolation, lack of emotional support, and fear around release dates.

Impact on Children:

- Children displayed emotional and behavioural difficulties, especially when left without clear explanations.
- Older children often took on caregiving responsibilities.

Support Services:

- Schools were often seen as positive and stable, though sometimes failed to connect behaviour with family context.
- Children Heard and Seen was frequently cited as the most effective support, alongside Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and Early Help.
- Families appreciated legal and therapeutic support, especially when timed to suit their readiness.

Systemic Shortcomings:

- Social services tended to address only immediate physical risk, not emotional or psychological needs.
- Police support was inconsistent—some families felt ignored after arrest events.
- Some families lacked supportive extended networks, highlighting the need for peer or professional alternatives.



This study revealed what families actually experience, underscoring the importance of:

- ▶ Ongoing and re-offered support
- ▶ Therapeutic and legal aid
- ▶ Carer-specific services to manage emotional burden
- ▶ Clear, age-appropriate communication tools for children

Please note that these studies were not conducted with any intention to suggest future outcomes for children. They were intended purely to shine a light on some of the challenges children face prior to and after the imprisonment of a parent, with the aim of assisting ongoing efforts to support all children with a parent in prison.

The full reports are accessible at: www.tvvpp.co.uk/project/paramount/

Theory of change based on the Thames Valley Operation Paramount model

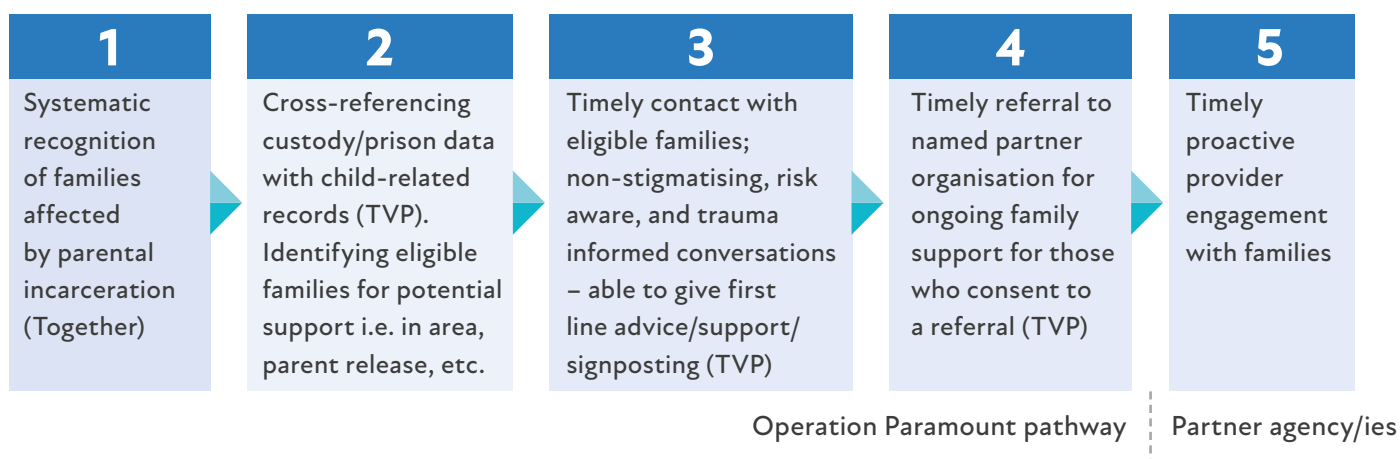
Goal

That children affected by parental imprisonment experience improved wellbeing, reduced stigma, and timely access to support, reducing short, medium, and long-term risk of adverse outcomes such as poor mental health, or difficulties engaging in education.

Assumptions

- Early recognition enables earlier, more effective support
- Data sharing is legal, ethical, and operationally feasible
- Third-sector partners/community-based professionals have capacity and expertise to provide appropriate support
- Families are willing to engage with services when approached sensitively
- Trauma-informed, non-stigmatising engagement at first contact increases take-up of services

Gateways



Inputs

- Prison reception data and Police Record Management System (RMS) e.g. Niche
- Data-sharing agreements between partners and police
- Dedicated Operation Paramount coordinator within police
- Appropriately skilled police-based professional to make first contact with families
- Specifically commissioned community-based practitioners
- Local multi-agency partnerships (e.g. schools, social care)

Outputs

- Number of children identified as affected by parental imprisonment
- Number of families offered support
- Number and proportion of families who engage
- Case studies demonstrating good practice
- Quantitative/longitudinal measures of potential impact

For example:

- **School engagement statistics i.e. percentage attendance**
- **Parental Stress Scale**
 Berry, J. O., & Jones, W. H. (1995). The Parental Stress Scale: Initial psychometric evidence. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 12(3), 463–472.
<https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-measures-guidance/directory-of-outcome-measures/parental-stress-scale-pss/>
- **Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire**
 Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38(5), 581–586
<https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-measures-guidance/directory-of-outcome-measures/strengths-and-difficulties-questionnaire-sdq/>

Outcomes

Short-Term Outcomes

- Increased recognition and visibility of affected children
- Improved professional awareness of the issue across services
- Improved access to appropriate, timely support
- Strengthened multi-agency coordination

Medium-Term Outcomes

- Improved emotional wellbeing, resilience and stability in children
- Reduction in school disengagement or behavioural challenges
- Families feel less isolated and more supported
- Reduction in stigma associated with parental imprisonment

Long-Term Outcomes / Impact

- Reduced risk of escalation into further vulnerability (e.g., exclusion)
- Greater system-wide capacity to respond to hidden harms
- Model adopted or adapted in other force areas
- Policy-level recognition of the need for a statutory mechanism to identify and support affected children

Theoretical framework

Rationale / Problem Statement <i>Why this toolkit is needed</i>	ACEs framework – Parental incarceration is a known Adverse Childhood Experience, associated with long-term trauma and poorer life outcomes. Enables early recognition and proactive support offer.
Identification and Data Linkage Process <i>How children are recognised using data from prison reception matched with statutory databases.</i>	Ecological systems theory – Recognition that children are affected not just by the event of imprisonment but by the systems surrounding them i.e. education, justice, health, and social care. Data-sharing connects exosystem-level systems to support the child at the centre. Public health prevention model – Early identification is a primary prevention strategy, before problems escalate. Supports the design of the proactive data-led approach.
Referral pathway <i>Facilitating access to appropriate support</i>	Trauma-informed care – caregivers and children are approached with empathy, offered emotional support, and not judged for their circumstances. Repeated contact with an opt-in approach recommended. Supports the emotional safety, empowerment, and collaboration principles in the offer. Strengths-based and resilience frameworks – Acknowledges the resilience of carers, empowers families through choice and flexibility. Justifies flexible re-offers of support. Ecological systems theory – Highlights the need for coherence and clear pathways between agencies. Reinforces value of interagency communication.

Implementation

Needs assessment

Conducting a needs assessment is essential for ensuring that the Operation Paramount pathway is rooted in the lived realities of children and families affected by parental imprisonment, as well as the operational realities of professionals.

The following is a suggested needs assessment checklist to assist in essential foundation mapping and infrastructure.

Needs assessment checklist

Stakeholder mapping	
Police (especially custody/reception and safeguarding teams)	
Education professionals (pastoral leads, exclusion teams)	
Local Authority children's services	
Third sector organisations (e.g. family support or prison reform charities)	
Children and families with lived experience	

Data landscape review	
What data is currently available (e.g. custody/prison reception data, social care records, education records)	
Existing data-sharing agreements	
Gaps or barriers in data matching and cross-referencing that hinder early identification	

Frontline practitioner interviews/focus groups	
Current awareness of children affected by parental imprisonment	
Referral pathways (formal/informal)	
Barriers to support (time, stigma, consent issues)	
Training and confidence needs	

Family and young person consultation	
How they were (or weren't) recognised	
What support they needed and what they got	
Experiences with services (police, school, social workers)	
Ideas for making early support more accessible and respectful	
Consider a formal role in setting up and reviewing the pathway for someone with lived experience	

Systems Readiness Assessment	
Infrastructure available to support the <i>Operation Paramount</i> pathway (IT, workforce, protocols)	
Willingness of partners to engage in proactive identification	
Training gaps and opportunities	

Core components within the pathway

1 Timely Identification of Affected Children

- Cross-referencing prison/custody data with child records
- Consistent process for identifying newly affected children

2 Data Sharing Infrastructure

- Legal and ethical data-sharing agreements between police and trusted partners
- Secure mechanisms for transmitting referrals to service providers

3 Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

- To track engagement rates, wellbeing outcomes, and service feedback
- Case studies and data used to refine and advocate for the model

4 Dedicated Coordination Role

- Embedded within police to oversee identification, referrals, and relationship-building

5 Trauma-Informed, Non-Stigmatising Engagement

- Families approached with sensitivity, respect, and an understanding of trauma

6 Multi-Agency Partnership Approach

- Formal collaboration between named delivery organisations
- Clear protocols for shared responsibility and coordinated response

7 Proactive Referral to Trusted Community-Based Providers

- Sensitive outreach to families by familiar and trusted practitioners
- Ensures families receive relevant support without needing to self-refer

Adaptable components

1 Type and Role of Community Partners

2 Staffing Structure

3 Engagement Approaches

- To consider – cultural considerations and language preferences should shape engagement methods

4 Evaluation Metrics

- While core outcome areas remain, local stakeholders might add indicators relevant to their service landscape (e.g., housing stability, SEND needs, etc.)

Key Staff Roles and Responsibilities

Operation Paramount Coordinator

Core Role: Lead the coordination of the intervention within the police and across agencies

Responsibilities:

- Oversee and manage the identification of affected children (via prison data/RMS)
- Maintain and implement data-sharing agreements
- Act as the main point of contact for internal teams and external partners
- Monitor fidelity to the model and troubleshoot barriers
- Lead internal advocacy to embed the approach within routine police practice
- Ensure agreed thresholds with statutory partners are followed i.e. when a referral to Children's Social Care is required etc.
- Monitor and update adult records and improve parental links in data in case of future imprisonment

Data & Intelligence Officer / Analyst

Core Role: Handle data processing and child identification through secure systems

Responsibilities:

- Cross-reference prison data/RMS with child-related databases
- Generate alerts or lists of children affected by recent parental imprisonment
- Ensure data protection and General Data Protection Regulation compliance
- Provide monitoring reports and trends to the Operation Paramount Coordinator

Delivery practitioner

Core role: to operationalise the family/support connection

Could be combined with the Co-ordinator role.

Responsibilities:

- To sensitively approach families with the community support offer
- To refer to named community organisation where families consent
- To document outcome of offer
- To be able to offer basic advice and signposting with first contact
- To be able to risk assess during this initial conversation and broach any safeguarding or safety needs indicated and action needed

Community-Based Practitioners

Core Role: Provide frontline support to children and families

Responsibilities (in relation to this toolkit):

- To proactively approach the family in a timely manner when a referral is received.

Strategic Lead / Commissioner

Core Role: Ensure strategic alignment, sustainability, and oversight

Responsibilities:

- Secure funding and strategic buy-in across agencies
- Embed the model in local policy or commissioning frameworks
- Advocate for statutory recognition and system change
- Oversee performance, outcomes, and service development

Resources checklist 1/3

Human resources	
OP Coordinator – Leads implementation, data-sharing, and partnership work	
Data/Intelligence Officer – Matches custody data with child records securely	
Delivery practitioner – Make offer and refer to partner agency	
Community-based practitioners – Engage families, deliver trauma-informed support	
Strategic Lead / Commissioner – Provides leadership, advocacy, and long-term sustainability	
Peer Mentors / Lived Experience Champions – Build trust with families and staff	
Technical and digital resources (<i>additional resources in italics</i>)	
Secure data-matching system – Links Prison reception data and Police Record Management System (RMS) with child databases	
GDPR-compliant referral platform – Transmits referrals safely to support providers	
Shared case support tools – Enables tracking and collaboration across agencies	
Digital toolkit / resource hub – Provides guidance, protocols, templates for all partners	
Reporting dashboards – Monitors key indicators (e.g. children identified, support uptake)	

Resources checklist 2/3

Training & Professional Development	
Trauma-informed practice, stigma awareness, engagement training – For all practitioners engaging with families	
Briefings for local authority partner agencies – Ensures broad awareness and local consistency	
Lived experience input/ co-produced materials/speakers	
Partnership and governance resources	
Multi-agency partnership forum – Strategic oversight and joint problem-solving	
Data sharing agreements– Legal/ ethical framework for sharing sensitive information	
Working protocols and flowcharts – Clear, agreed process for identification, referral, follow-up	
Evaluation framework – Shared outcomes and impact tracking	

Resources checklist 3/3

Operational & Financial Resources	
Core funding (staff and delivery) – Salaries for coordinator, practitioners, training, etc.	
Commissioned services budget – For contracted third-sector delivery partners	
Technology licensing / software – Referral platform, data systems etc	
Outreach and materials – Information packs, translated materials, digital engagement tools	

Implementation checklist 1/5

Foundation & Governance	
Task	Notes
Secure senior buy-in from police and multi-agency leadership	
Establish or identify an appropriate existing multi-agency steering/oversight group	
Draft and sign formal data-sharing agreements	
Develop/refine standard operating procedures	
Identify and appoint OP Coordinator	
Assign key agency contacts (schools, social care, third sector)	

Implementation checklist 2/5

Data & Information Systems	
Task	Notes
Define data sources	
Establish secure data-matching process	
Identify technical platform or referral mechanism	
Build/agree data protection protocols (GDPR compliant)	
Set up case tracking / referral monitoring system	

Implementation checklist 3/5

Staffing & Capacity Building	
Task	Notes
Recruit or designate: Coordinator, Analyst, Practitioner	
Develop job descriptions and responsibilities for all roles	
Provide training on trauma-informed, stigma-sensitive approaches	
Deliver inter-agency briefings (police, education, social care)	
Include lived experience voices in training or resources/delivery	

Implementation checklist 4/5

Referral & Engagement Pathway	
Task	Notes
Design child identification and referral flowchart	
Confirm and brief referral partners (e.g., local charities, family support)	
Develop communication templates for families (letters, calls, consent forms)	
Create family engagement guidance (e.g., trauma-informed scripts)	
Build and distribute practitioner toolkit	

Implementation checklist 5/5

Resources & Materials	
Task	Notes
Develop toolkit and guidance pack for practitioner	
Create family-facing materials (multi-language if needed)	

Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning	
Task	Notes
Define short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes	
Agree data collection process (quant + qual)	
Design referral and engagement reporting templates	
Capture and analyse case studies	
Schedule regular review meetings with partners	
Adapt delivery model based on feedback & learning	

Referencing

To reference, please use:

Bekaert, S., & Massie, R. (2025) *What Works Series: The Thames Valley Operation Paramount Toolkit – A toolkit to assist in local implementation of a pathway to recognise and offer support to children and families affected by parental imprisonment*. Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership: Kidlington, UK

Contact us



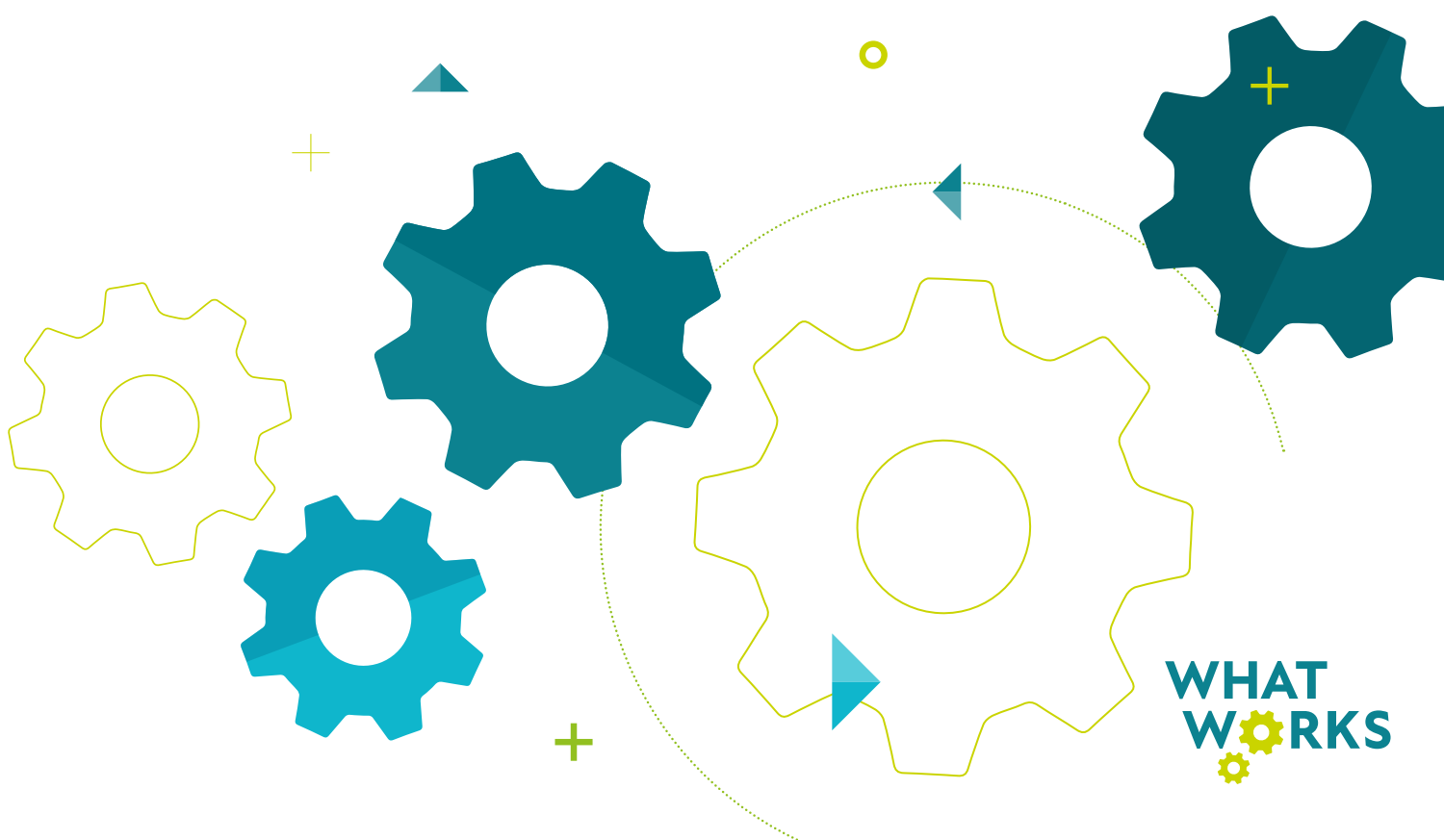
If you have any questions please contact the core programme team via vpp@thamesvalley.police.uk



Our website has information on all our projects and evaluations.
www.thamesvalley-pcc.gov.uk



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WHAT
WORKS

