
N8 POLICING RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP Knowledge Exchange Internships 2021-2022

CONNECTING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

Effective communication with the public is critical to the principle of policing by consent, and Corporate Communications teams, as the 'official' voice of Forces, play a critical role. From July 2021, N8 PRP funded 2x12 month internships at West Yorkshire Police to evaluate and develop the force's communications strategy as it related to 'hard-to-reach' groups.

This report highlights the result of West Yorkshire Police's pilot project to engage the services of media interns to drive greater engagement with young and ethnic minority audiences, which broadened during the work to include a wider female audience, in the context of public outrage over violence against women and girls (VAWG). The objective was to identify communications gaps, suggest and implement new ways of working and create a solid base for future activity.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Focus on what you can change at a communications level:
Become an anti-victim blaming organisation**

Language and imagery were as much a potential barrier to communicating with some groups as the communications mechanisms themselves, in particular victim-blaming terminology in relation to female victims of crime.

- **Effective consultation is early and open**

Consultation is fundamental to producing successful content and direct engagement with non-police groups was hugely beneficial and gave messages credibility.

- **To be engaging, you need to be relatable**

Modern, less formal messaging generated a positive public reaction on social media.

- **Internships effectively challenge established practices**

The Corporate Communications Team were to an extent, locked into a set way of working and the interns' challenging approach helped changed perceptions and working practices.

- **Increase/redirect resource to social media and non-traditional messaging**

Resourcing levels within the Corporate Communications Team continue to be an inhibiting factor in terms of developing and expanding our reach.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Communications are a vital part of modern police forces. As a publicly accountable body, the police service needs to tell the public what it is doing, account for its actions and reassure and inform society. We rely on the media and public to assist us with information to prevent and detect crime. This has become an increasingly important function, given the explosion in the availability and use of social media. Corporate Communications also play a key role in sustaining public confidence. West Yorkshire Police, like all forces, has historically attracted lower levels of public confidence from ethnic minority communities, due to historical and current events – both those that are the responsibility of West Yorkshire Police, and those that take place outside the force’s jurisdiction, on a national and international stage, but nonetheless influence perceptions and attitudes towards the police.

METHODOLOGY

The approach was to bring the interns on board as an integral part of the team from the start, which was particularly crucial given the added complication of remote working. Rapid training on Corporate Communications and the structure and practices of the Force was therefore vital, and enabled them to quickly begin contributing to the work of the team.

A core aim of the project was to ask the internships to challenge established ways of working and question the status quo. Supporting and encouraging these challenges has been key to the success of the project, with the interns producing materials that would not have been developed in-house that went on to be approved and used at a senior level. This has led to wider changes in the Corporate Communications practice, with a new focus and understanding on anti-victim blaming language and the use of consultations. There have been several requests for in-Force presentations and requests from other Forces nationally (Durham Constabulary, Cheshire Police) to share our ‘interns’ experience’.

MAIN FINDINGS

Focus on what you can change at a communications level: Becoming an anti-victim blaming organisation

West Yorkshire Police's VAWG statement of intent (2021) outlines one of their priorities as ‘to increase trust and confidence in policing.’ The interns addressed that this could not be achieved whilst ‘victim-blaming’ attitudes prevail within the force's external communications content. Victim-blaming is the practice of holding sexual trauma victims and survivors partially or fully responsible for the crime/s committed against them (Schwartz & Leggett, 1999).

The interns conducted a review of WYP’s website, noting materials of relevance, to be removed and/or replaced. One example was a ‘night out survival guide’ (see appendix) which included the phrases "avoid putting yourself in a situation you might regret" and "If you get drunk you're more likely to do things you wouldn't normally." These are prime example of victim blaming. The frequent reiteration of ‘you’ contradicts the aim of ‘pursuing perpetrators’ (VAWG Statement of Intent, 2021), instead placing the responsibility to avoid assault onto potential victims. This also gives perpetrators a ‘free pass’ by erasing their responsibility, supporting harmful attitudes about when women ‘deserve’ to be assaulted. It is therefore doing the exact opposite of crime prevention (Suarez and Gadalla, 2010).

The advice was generally to undertake ‘safety work’, a phrase coined by Liz Kelly (2016) to describe the habitual strategies that women develop in response to their experiences in public. For example, "eating before you go out can help stop you getting too drunk." The focus safety work in official advice reinforces the normalisation of VAWG, through the implicit message that women ought to expect violence and are responsible if they fail to avoid it. In practice, this means that women and girls who are assaulted are scrutinised for ‘risky’ behaviour, rather than the accused being scrutinised for violent and criminal

behaviour. This often leads to the re-traumatisation of victims and survivors by the organisation meant to protect them (Suarez and Gadalla, 2010), and a failure to respond to violent crime effectively.

The Corporate Communications department decided that all relevant future content was to align with the VAWG statement of intent (2021). The new approach aimed to be factual, objective, and explicitly promote 'anti-victim blaming messages' such as "sexual assault and harassment is never your fault." In the new booklet, information was given on accessing support services, recognising the signs and symptoms of spiking, and how to preserve evidence in the event of an assault.

This resource should improve public trust in policing and encourage reporting by clearly identifying who is responsible for a crime and providing reassurance that victims will not be blamed for being assaulted. This may also deter perpetrators by clearly challenging entrenched ideas that justify VAWG.

The success of this approach was highlighted by the engagement on our 'reporting and safety guide for victims of spiking' post which was circulated on Facebook and Twitter. This received good engagement, compared to some of our other proactive social media content, from the public (collectively 272 shares, 68 likes, and 7 comments) and positive feedback from our Chief Officer Team and other forces.

Effective consultation is early and open

The website review highlighted the lack of consultation previously undertaken by WYP for their previous communications on sexual violence. Consulting with regional women's groups for future communications was identified as an important step in becoming an anti-victim-blaming organisation.

So, for the force's public facing VAWG statement, WYP consulted with Women's Lives Leeds, a "holistic alliance" of a dozen women and girls organisations around Leeds that maintain "specialisms in domestic violence, mental health, sexual health, sex work, trafficking, child sexual exploitation and education" (Women's Lives Leeds, 2022).

As well as the initial written content of the statement of intent being shared with the charity, West Yorkshire Police sought advice on the supporting draft of the graphics. The three graphic posts were created to convey the three aspects of the statement of intent; each post displayed a woman, of different races in the same outfit - a top and shorts. Women's Lives Leeds believed this could be interpreted as active sexualisation and the promotion of subliminal gender stereotypes of women and girls - 'why does she need to be wearing shorts?' This raised a point that the interns would not otherwise have considered, as the outfit was, from their point of view, unremarkable.

In response, the interns acknowledged this point and further considered who was being represented in the imagery, choosing graphics that represented several women of different races and religions. This received positive feedback from Women's Lives Leeds:

"I can definitely see the feedback incorporated....looking forward to further collaborative working in the future... I've not seen a case of feedback being really listened to and incorporated like it has been...this is the sort of thing I think will help women have that increased trust and confidence, as the aim states."

This highlighted the importance of external consultation for the corporate communications team because something that was not important to them could re-traumatise victims or survivors, and this must be considered. West Yorkshire Police have expressed their commitment to continuing this developed relationship with Women's Lives Leeds and hope to continue to consult with them and other women and sexual assault groups and charities.

Coercive Control: to be engaging, you need to be relatable

West Yorkshire Police have created and distributed discourses on emotional and psychological abuse and coercive control since coercive control became a criminal act in 2015. However, previous materials had failed to give explicit, real-life examples of this abuse, making the behaviour difficult for the public to

recognise. Better recognition of coercive control is beneficial for victims and wider social networks, supporting them to identify abuse and seek help, and for perpetrators and potential perpetrators, giving them the opportunity to reflect on and question their behaviours.

The interns developed a 'Valentine's Day' campaign with this approach, as it was an opportunity to discuss emotional and psychological elements of intimate partner relationships and when these are abusive.

The campaign aimed to connect with the 'hard-to-reach' groups of young people and domestic abuse victims and survivors, who can have aversions to the police, through an informal and personable lens. In an Instagram story, the campaign used cartoon imagery connected with Valentine's Day (such as chocolate boxes and flowers) alongside textual content giving examples of coercive behaviours in an accessible, question-and-answer format (see appendix). For example, "what does gaslighting sound like?", "How might this sound on Valentine's Day?", with answers such as, "don't you care about what I've done for you today?", and "I haven't got you underwear to not see you in it." This was supported by factual information on the criminal nature of coercive control - "coercive control is an illegal act that can result in a 5-year prison sentence, a fine or both."

This post therefore informed people that coercive control is recognised as abuse and reassured victims that they can access formal support through the police.

The success of this post was exemplified through substantial traction and engagement compared to other domestic abuse posts on the force's external social media platforms and website. In 24 hours, the Valentine's Day Gaslighting post got 421 shares and over 300 likes, compared to 5 shares and 3 likes within 48 hours for a previous domestic abuse campaign. To coincide with Valentine's Day, the campaign was produced within one day by using free resources on Canva rather than creating original graphic designs, highlighting the possibility of creating effective campaigns with minimal resources.

CONCLUSION

The project confirmed the understanding that West Yorkshire Police corporate communications is sincerely committed to effective communications with 'hard to reach groups', but established practice was an obstacle to achieving this. The project has generated an explicit commitment to becoming an 'anti-victim blaming organisation' is all messaging, a new focus on routinely consulting with community groups on relevant communications, and developing campaigns that target 'hard-to-reach' audiences with relatable and accessible information.

The value of the internships in shifting team thinking away from 'this is how it's done' to a more open approach should be emphasised as a major success of the project.

Resourcing is an inhibiting factor for development, as the force currently has only one dedicated social media specialist. A sustained internship programme and further investment would be valuable in building on the success of the project. As a testament to the value of this work, West Yorkshire Police Chief Officer Team has received this pilot very positively, agreeing to a further year two interns intake for 2022/23.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Reflecting national pressures, the scope of this project narrowed from the original aim of evaluating communications with 'hard to reach groups' more broadly to a focus on messaging around VAWG. Further work focusing on communication with ethnic minority groups would therefore be valuable. In addition, measuring and evaluating communications campaigns to assess not only the reach but the impact of campaigns will vital to future development.

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