



Thames Valley Youth consultation



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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	6
Research Methodology	6
Young People Demographics	7
Findings from Buckinghamshire Youth Cabinet	8
Findings from Goring and District Youth Club	9
Findings from Reading Youth Offending Service	11
Summary	13
Appendix	14

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Foreword

Thames Valley Police recognises the importance of listening to young voices, and has invited the National Youth Agency to assist. During the Autumn of 2010, a number of young people in this area gave their views – warts and all – on their experiences, perceptions and expectations of the police. Their comments are mature, balanced and heartfelt. The challenge for Thames Valley Police is to help officers and staff to ensure that encounters with young people are as positive as can be. I am very grateful for the work of the National Youth Agency on this project, but final thanks must go to all the young people who contributed so enthusiastically to this valuable and revealing research.

Steve Rowell
Assistant Chief Constable – Local Policing
Thames Valley Police

Executive Summary

This report details the findings from three youth consultation focus groups held with young people between the ages of 11 and 18 years from Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire between October and December 2010. A summary of the key findings from each focus group are as follows:

Buckinghamshire Youth Cabinet

- Two-thirds of youth cabinet members feel very safe or safe at home, in their neighbourhoods and at school, whilst many young people felt unsafe in the town centre if alone and whilst waiting for public transport during the hours of darkness.
- More CCTV, police on the streets and police officers at schools were the key ways young people felt the police can improve young people's safety along with responding to incidents quicker and dealing with problems earlier, tougher enforcement action, and focusing on persistent offenders and high crime areas.
- Bullying at school, cyber bullying, underage and adults drinking alcohol and smoking cannabis were seen as the main anti social behaviour and crime concerns amongst young people.
- Views on Police Community Support Officers were mixed with half suggesting they were useful for reassuring the public and the remainder suggesting they were not useful because of their limited powers.
- Young people's stated police officers and PCSOs were not regularly seen in their neighbourhoods.
- Most young people reported positive experiences with the police and trust the police to look after them. The majority feel the police talk to young people on their level and with respect but many felt the police could improve relations by treating them as adults.
- Only a small number of young people had been a victim or witness to crime with criminal damage, theft and assault the most common crimes identified and only a minority had reported crimes to the police.
- Few young people had accessed the police force website and suggested the best way to communicate was via Twitter or leaflets distributed at schools and in their neighbourhoods.
- Young people felt the police could improve relations with young people by not wearing uniforms when meeting young people, starting work with young people earlier i.e. at primary schools, stop making negative assumptions about all young people, be young person friendly and talk informally with young people not just when undertaking formal police business.



Goring and District Youth Club, Oxfordshire

- The majority of young people feel safe or very safe in the rural communities where they live but feel less safe during the hours of darkness and particularly in the nearby town of Reading.
- More police officers and village patrols along with improved street lighting were identified as the key ways the police can improve young people's safety. The majority of young people feel the police could improve their response time to crime and anti social incidents and listen more to the views and concerns of young people.
- Young people are most concerned about violent crime including robbery and sexual violence as well as drug and alcohol misuse. Consensus from the male respondents was the police were not addressing these issues whereas the girls were generally more positive about the police response.
- Views about police visibility were mixed, with many young people reporting very few police officers in their villages but more frequently seen at school.
- Perceptions of Police Community Support Officers were generally negative due to their limited powers.
- Over one third of the young people said they have been a victim or witness to a crime in the past year, crimes included: burglary, criminal damage to vehicles and drunk and disorderly behaviour and very few young people had reported these crimes to the police.
- Female respondents trust the police to look after them, whilst male respondents did not trust the police to look after them.
- Young people views about whether the police make them feel safe were evenly split between those who did and those who did not.
- The majority of young people feel they are treated differently because of their age with many suggesting the police do not talk on their level and with respect.
- A quarter of young people said they have been stopped and searched by the police.
- Few young people have accessed the local police website and those who had suggest it is hard to understand and not young person friendly. Young people said they would like more website information about local police patrols and numbers of police resources.

Reading Youth Offending Service, Berkshire

- Most young people from Reading Youth Offending Service said they feel safe or very safe where they live in Reading.
- Many young people felt there needs to be more police on the streets and more CCTV cameras to improve young people's safety along with quicker response time when dealing with incidents, improved interactions especially when undertaking stop and search procedures with young people and an increased focus on crime not young people hanging around were the key ways young people felt the police can improve their response to crime and anti-social behaviour.
- Views about Police Community Support Officers were mixed; some thought them friendly but many viewed them as ineffective because of their lack of power of arrest and inability to stop and search people.
- The majority of young people said they would only contact the police if there was a serious problem such as assault or burglary as they would not want to be a "grass".
- Half of the young people said they would trust the police to look after them and half said they would not, some suggested it depended on the situation, however, the majority said they would trust the police to deal with an emergency situation.
- The majority of young people stated they feel they are treated differently by the police because of their age and a few suggested they are treated differently because of their ethnicity.
- Young people suggested some interactions with officers were okay but most experiences with the police were not positive. Some young people felt harassed in relation to the number of times they were stopped and searched and a couple of young people suggested they had been threatened or physically assaulted by police officers.
- How police officers communicate with young people is seen as the most effective way the police can improve their response to young people. Young people want police officers to be polite, courteous and treat young people with respect and on their level; they want their views to be listened to and not to be prejudged.



Introduction

Thames Valley Police is committed to consulting and engaging with young people and this report summarises the key findings from three focus groups undertaken by the National Youth Agency on behalf of Thames Valley Police in the autumn of 2010.

The young people who participated in these focus groups were drawn from the three counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire that collectively make up the Thames Valley Police Force area. Thames Valley Police specifically asked the National Youth Agency to consult with young people with direct experience of the police, young people from rural communities and young

people involved with local youth fora and UK Youth Parliament representatives.

The findings from this research reflects the views of a small number of young people from across Thames Valley and cannot be construed to be representative of all young people from across the region. However, the information the young people have provided gives a unique and in depth insight into the views of crime, anti social behaviour and policing from a young person's perspective and provides opportunities for Thames Valley Police to consider and respond to the issues and concerns raised by young people.

Research Methodology

The National Youth Agency in conjunction with Thames Valley Police developed a two hour focus group sessions with 28 questions (see Appendix) about personal safety, anti social behaviour and crime and policing.

In line with Thames Valley Police requests, the National Youth Agency invited specific groups from each of the three Thames Valley counties to take part in the consultation, namely; Buckinghamshire Youth Cabinet, Goring and District Youth Club in rural Oxfordshire, and young offenders from Reading Youth Offending Service, Berkshire. The National Youth Agency explained the purpose of the

research to each project and asked them to invite between 20-30 young people to participate in a prearranged consultation event and every organisation was provided with funding to cover room hire and young people's transport and refreshment expenses. Each of three sessions was facilitated by NYA facilitators, supported by project staff, at the start of the session the research was explained and young people were assured their anonymity in taking part. At the end of each focus group every young people was given a £10 high street voucher in recognition of their contribution.

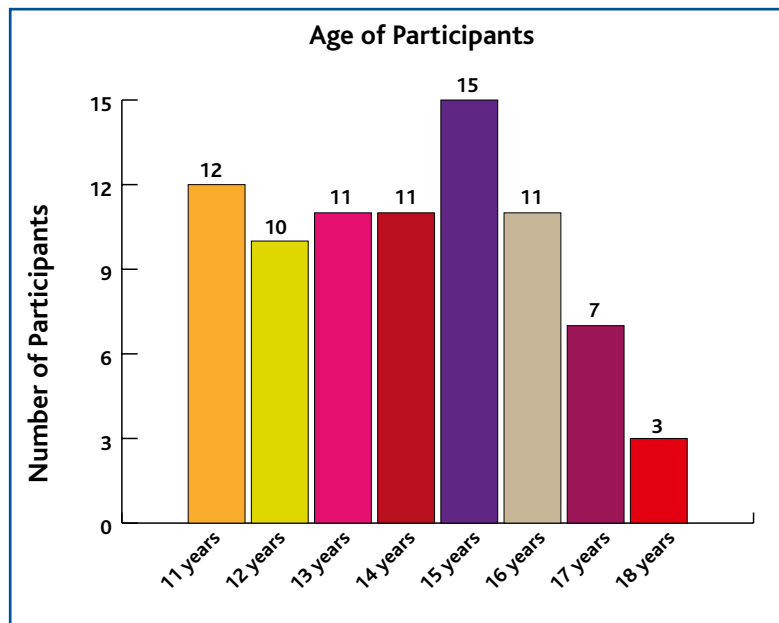
Young People Demographics

In total, 80 young people (46 male and 34 female) took part in the consultation.

The young people came from across the three counties collectively making up the Thames Valley Police area with concentrations of young people from Goring and neighbouring Woodcote in Oxfordshire, Reading (including Caversham and Tilehurst)

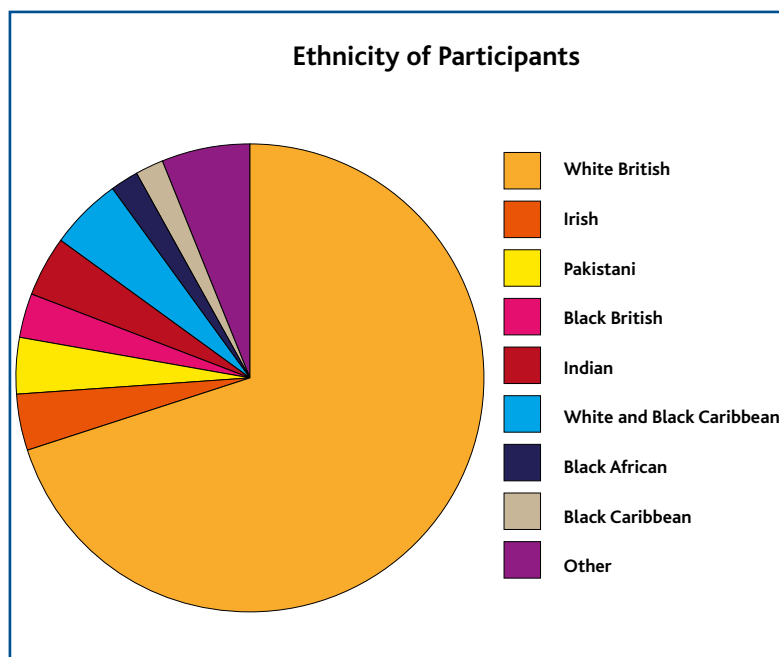
in Berkshire, and young people from Buckinghamshire drawn from across the county (including Marlow, Buckingham, High Wycombe, Aylesbury, Amersham and Milton Keynes).

The age range of participants ranged between 11 and 18 years with the average age of participants being 15 years.



The ethnic composition of the young people who took part in the consultation was fairly typical if not slightly higher than the 7%

ethnic composition of Thames Valley as detailed below:



Findings from Buckinghamshire Youth Cabinet

Personal Safety

Two-thirds of youth cabinet members feel very safe or safe at home and in their neighbourhoods, the majority feel safe at school: "I do feel safe in school because of the welfare officers, police and teachers" although a small number were concerned about bullying both inside and outside of school as one young woman commented: *"School uniform can attract problems "identity" from rival schools, I feel more safe in non uniform"*. Many young people suggested they felt unsafe in their local town centre if alone *"don't like it when there's groups of young people but it's safe if you're with a few mates"* and whilst waiting for public transport during the hours of darkness: *"I don't feel safe at bus stop at night"*.

More CCTV, police on the streets and police officers at schools were seen as the key ways police can improve young people's safety as one participant suggested: *"They should put a police person outside some schools at the end of the day to make sure students stay safe"*. Along with responding quicker and dealing with problems earlier, tougher enforcement action, and focusing on persistent offenders and high crime areas as one young person recommended: *"keep an eye on dangerous people, keep an eye on dodgy roads"*.

Bullying at school is fairly common as explained by one young man: *"low level bullying is very common but serious bullying is rare"*, cyber bullying, underage people and adults drinking alcohol, smoking cannabis, fighting and vandalism, particularly in parks as illustrated by one young woman: *"we have a park around the corner from my house that has been vandalised; people write rude words on the equipment and scratch the paint off"* were seen as the main anti social behaviour and crime concerns.

Views of the Police

Views about Police Community Support Officers were mixed with approximately half suggesting they were useful for reassuring the public: *"I think they are good as they reassure people its safe"* whilst the remainder suggested they were not useful because of their limited powers: *"They seem like policemen but with less power"* and many participants suggested they needed more authority. Regardless of young people's views about PCSOs many stated they were not regularly seen in their neighbourhoods, as one young person commented: *"useful but never see them in communities"*.

A quarter of young people reported seeing police officers at least once a week, usually they saw police officers in the town centre or at school *"once a week as they come to my school"*, the remainder reported seeing police officers less frequently with a quarter suggesting they saw police officers less than once a month.

Over three-quarters of young people know who to contact at the police but some suggested whether they contacted the police depended on the problem: *"I do know who to call but it depends on the problem whether I would call the police"*.

Two-thirds of young people reported their experiences with the local police were positive, with one-fifth reporting very little contact with them.

Nearly two-thirds of young people trust the police to look after them, a third were unsure and only one young person stated they did not trust the police to look after them.

Over half of the young people said they do not feel treated differently by the police because of their age or ethnicity, a fifth felt the police treat them differently because

of their age and the remainder were unsure whether they were treated differently.

Over half of young people feel the police talk on a young people's level and with respect nevertheless the majority of young people felt the police could improve relations with all young people by treated them with respect and treat young people as adults: *"Just be nicer and talk to young people, build a better relationship"*.

Only one participant had been stopped and searched by the police and a small number of young people said they had been a victim or witness to crime in the past twelve months with the most common crimes identified as criminal damage, theft and assault. The vast majority had not reported these crimes to the police either because they were scared to *"police are scary – so no"*, did not wish to be seen as *"a grass"* or did not perceive the crime serious enough to warrant contacting the police as one young man commented: *"wasn't anything that serious"*.

A fifth of young people had accessed the police force website either for homework, to check roads closures or find the local non emergency crime number. Young people suggested the best way to communicate with them was via Twitter or by distributing information via their schools and in their neighbourhoods, Facebook and the web were not popular methods of communication.

When asked how young people felt they police could improve relations between the police and young people suggestions included: *"police not wearing uniforms when meeting young people"*; starting work with young people earlier i.e. at primary schools as one young person commented *"get to schools at a younger age"*; be more young person friendly; *"stop making negative assumptions about young people"* and talk informally with young people not just when undertaking formal police business as one young man suggested: *"Don't talk enough to young people on the streets only to stop and search never anything nice to say"*.

Findings from Goring and District Youth Club, Oxfordshire

Personal Safety

The majority of young people feel safe or very safe in the rural communities where they live as one young person commented: *"pretty safe as you don't usually hear anything has gone wrong"*. The majority of young people said they feel safe at home but feel less safe during the hours of darkness: *"safe in day not so much at night"* and many young people suggested they feel unsafe in the nearby town of Reading.

All the young people stated they feel safer when outside with their friends than on their own and a small number of young people said they prefer to stay indoors than go out alone as one young woman stated: *"I don't leave the*

house alone". Young people suggested they increase their personal safety by staying with bigger groups of friends, *"staying away from troublemakers"*, taking self-defence classes and carrying a mobile phone with them or staying in well-lit areas.

Young people are most concerned about violent crime including bullying and fighting at school, robbery and sexual violence as well as drug and alcohol misuse, particularly in local parks: *"there are drunks, people smoking weed and taking cocaine"*.

More police officers and village patrols were identified as the main ways the police can improve young people's safety: *"I would feel*

safer if we had more police in our village” along with improved street lighting.

Views of the Police

The majority of male respondents felt the police were not addressing crime and anti social behaviour whereas the female participants were generally more positive about how the police deal with crime and anti social behaviour. However, most young people feel the police could improve their response time to crime and anti social incidents: *“be there more and quicker”, “increase police patrols in my village”* and *“listen more to the views and concerns of young people”*.

Young people’s views about police visibility were mixed, with many young people suggesting they see very few police officers in their villages as the following young women commented: *“never seen a police officer in my village”* and *“in Goring they are never there! Apart from at 1o’clock in the morning”*, though a fifth of young people reported seeing police officers often or very often, usually this was sightings of police officers at school as young woman stated: *“we only know ours because he goes to our school”*.

Perceptions of local police officers from those young people who regularly saw them were very positive, as the following quotes illustrate: *“our local police officer is pretty cool – he talks nice to us”* and *“our local policeman is very social – he tries to understand you”*.

Views of Police Community Support Officers were generally less positive; with some young people unsure of their remit and seen by many young people as a waste of time and money due to their limited powers, as one young man stated: *“a cop that can’t do anything”*.

The majority of male respondents said they

do not trust the police to look after them, in comparison, two thirds of female respondents trust the police to look after them. Young people’s views about whether the police make them feel safe were evenly split between those who did and those who did not.

Most young people said they feel they are treated differently and adversely by the police because of their age as the following comments illustrate: *“treat you differently because of your age from year 9 onwards”* and *“don’t listen to you if you’re young and if you’re not clever”* others suggested the way young people dress i.e. wearing a hoodie can also adversely influence how young people are dealt with by the police. Many young people suggested the police do not talk on their level and with respect and as one participant suggested: *“could be nicer and be polite”*.

Over one-quarter of young people said they had been stopped and searched by the police and they were not always clear why they were searched as one young man commented: *“quite annoyed, searched for no reason”*.

Over one-third of the young people said they have been a victim or witness to a crime in the past year, crimes included: burglary, criminal damage to vehicles: *“smashed up car with crowbar”* and drunk and disorderly behaviour. Very few young people reported the crimes to the police either because an adult reported the crime or the young person did not want to make a fuss as one young woman stated: *“don’t want police coming around”* or young people were scared to report the crime or be seen as *“a grass”*.

Very few young people had accessed the local police website and those who had suggested it was hard to understand and not young person friendly. Young people suggested they would like more information about local police patrols and numbers of police resources.

Findings from Reading Youth Offending Service, Berkshire

Personal Safety

Over two-thirds of the young people said they feel safe or very safe where they live in Reading as one young man commented: *“feel safe, new to the area and getting used to the area”*.

The main crime and anti social behaviour concerns expressed by young people were drug dealing, drunks shouting abuse, knife crime and burglary.

Views of the Police

Many young people felt there needed to be more police on the streets: *“lots of police cars but like more on the beat when they’re not dealing with other problems”* and *“have more officer patrolling areas that are known for crime”* along with more CCTV cameras to improve young people’s safety: *“put more cameras up to see the crime in my area and open the community police office 24/7”*.

Some young people suggested a quicker response time when responding to crime and anti social behaviour is required: *“response 3 to 4 hours needs to improve”*, along with improved interactions especially when undertaking stop and search procedures with young people and an increased focus on crime not young people hanging around were the key ways young people felt the police can improve their response to crime/ anti-social behaviour as one young person recommended: *“the police could change their approach when stopping young people for no apparent reason and they need to respect young people when talking to them, not all young people are up to mischief”*.

A small number of young people felt the police could not improve their safety, either because they would rather deal with their

issues themselves or because they felt they were labelled as offenders by the police as one young person commented: *“police don’t help me because I’m known to them – they are out to get me”*.

Views about Police Community Support Officers were mixed; some thought them friendly: *“I know what they are and they treat me more friendly”* but many viewed them as ineffective because of their lack of power of arrest and inability to stop and search people as the following young people commented: *“plastic police – can’t arrest you or search you, not effective, not useful”* and *“doesn’t make sense that specials have more power than PCSOs”* and from an offender’s perspective they are often not seen as a deterrent: *“just people in uniform and I’m not scared of them but I am of real police”*.

The majority of young people said they would only contact the police if there was a serious problem such as assault or burglary: *“if I was robbed then no, if I had my bike stolen then no, if my house was burgled then yes”* and many young people suggested they would not want to be a “grass” as one young person said: *“depends on what it is because I’m not really a grass if it is serious assault”* and *“would probably talk to a trusted adult/family first”*.

Half of the young people we spoke to said they would trust the police to look after them and half said they would not as one young man summed up: *“If I do something wrong they are quick to arrest me but when I go for help, nothing happens”*, some suggested it depended on the situation and the majority said they would trust the police to deal with an emergency situation: *“would trust them to deal with an emergency”*.

Three quarters of participants stated they are treated differently by the police because

of their age: *"police speak down to young people"* and a couple of young people suggested they are treated differently because of their ethnicity: *"when I was younger they took the mickey out of me and laughed at me... the police have called me names and treated me differently as an Irish Traveller"*. Many of the young people feel assumptions are made because of their previous offending or because their family members or peers are known to the police: *"because of the people you hang around with and where you hang around"*.

Over half of the young people felt their experiences with the local police were not positive, the main reasons included being stopped when not doing anything wrong: *"loads of times, don't know why – got threatened with being strip searched down the police station"* and not being treated fairly and with respect: *"some are just rude to me which makes me feel angry, most of the time they are alright, respect works both ways"*. Over two-thirds of young people stated they have experienced police officers who have been rude, swore at or felt they were not treated with respect. Young people suggested approximately half of the officers they interacted with were okay and the remainder were deemed to treat them unfairly: *"I would say it's 50/50 with half*

of the officers being unfair and rude and it seems to depend on what mood they are in". Some young people said they felt harassed particularly in relation to the number of times they had been stopped and searched: *"yes, loads – harass for no reason"* and a couple of young people suggested they had been physically assaulted or threatened by police officers as one young man suggested: *"they are always rude and swear at me but I am not allowed to swear back and when they hit me I can't hit back"*.

How police officers communicate with young people, particularly when undertaking stop and search is seen as the most effective way the police can improve their response to young people as one young person summarised: *"talk to young people as adults, [police officers need to be] less assertive about the power they have over young people because it is one of the quickest ways of getting young people's backs up"*. Young people want police officers to be polite, courteous and treat young people with respect and on their level: *"more polite and treat you like a human, they don't talk to adults the way they talk to young people"* and young people want their views to be listened to and not to be prejudged: *"don't assume I am or was doing something wrong"*.

Summary

The majority of young people feel very safe or safe in their local areas, young people's confidence is increased when they are with their friends and young people generally feel less safe alone in the local town centre and when using public transport particularly during the hours of darkness.

Young people feel the main crime and anti social behaviour issues are adults and young people drinking and taking drugs in public places, bullying and violent crime.

Young people would like more police officers, enhanced street lighting, more CCTV cameras, improved response time when dealing with incidents, and an increased focus on persistent offenders and high crime areas rather than on young people hanging around. These were seen as the key ways the police can improve their response to crime and anti social behaviour.

Many of the young people we spoke to have been a victim or witness to a crime in the past 12 months, most of the crimes reported were property and violent offences but many young people will not report the crimes they have experienced to the police.

Under reporting of crime by young people is a significant issue, reasons for this include: a perceived lack of response, poor response times, not viewing the crime as serious, being

scared of the police or not wanting to be seen a "grass" or preferring to deal with the matter themselves were the most common reasons for not reporting incidents to the police.

Many young people do not see police officers regularly in their neighbourhoods but they are seen more regularly in schools. Police Community Support Officers are not regularly seen and young people's views towards them are generally negative because of their limited powers of arrest.

Positive experiences of the police generally increase a young people's confidence in the criminal justice system, whilst negative encounters often exacerbate negative perceptions of the police. Although many of the young people in this consultation have had positive interactions and experiences with the police, many young people have not.

How police officers communicate with young people is seen as the most effective way the police can improve their response to young people. Young people want police officers to be polite, courteous and treat young people with respect and on their level; they want their views to be listened to and not to be prejudged and they want the police to talk to them informally and not just when on formal police business.

Appendix

Youth Consultation Questions

Personal Safety

1. How safe do you feel in the area where you live?
2. Do you feel safe in your home?
3. Do you feel safe at school?
4. Do you feel safe in the town centre?
5. Do you feel safe on buses or trains?
6. How do you increase your safety?
7. How can the police improve your safety?

Perceptions and Experiences of Crime and Anti Social Behaviour

8. Anti-social behaviour and crime what do these terms mean to you?
9. What are your crime/anti social behaviour issues?
10. Are the police addressing these issues?
11. How can the police improve their response to crime/anti social behaviour?

Perceptions and Experiences of the Police

12. Are the police in your neighbourhood visible?
13. How frequently do you see them?
14. Do you know what PCSOs are? And if so what are your views of them?
15. Do you know who to contact and would you contact the police if you had a problem?
16. In the past year, have you been a victim or witness of crime?
17. Did you report the crime to the police?
- 17a. If no, why didn't you report it to the police?

18. Are your experiences with the local police positive?
19. Do you trust the police to look after you?
- 19a. If not, why not?
20. Do you feel that you are treated differently by the police because of your age/gender/ethnicity etc? If yes, how were you treated differently?
21. Do the police talk to you on your level/with respect?
22. Do the police make you feel safe?
23. Have you been stopped and searched by the police?
24. How can the police improve their response generally and specifically to young people?
25. Have you accessed the local police website or Facebook page?
- 25a. If yes, did you find the information you were looking for?
26. Thames Valley Police are keen to improve communication and contact with young people – what you would like to know about the police and criminal justice issues?
27. How you would like to receive this information? How can Thames Valley Police contact you and by what means?
28. Anything else you would like to say specifically about young people and relations with the police?

Contact us



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Oxford Road, Kidlington, Oxfordshire OX5 2NX

0845 8 505 505 – use this number to report a non-emergency crime or to give information to Thames Valley Police. Call 999 in an emergency.

<http://www.thamesvalley.police.uk/home>



About the National Youth Agency

The National Youth Agency works in partnership with a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations to support and improve services for young people. Our particular focus is on youth work and we believe strongly that by investing in young people's personal and social development, young people are better able to live more active and fulfilling lives.

Working with young people, we advocate for more youth-friendly services and policies. We have four themes:

- Developing quality standards in work with young people
- Supporting services for young people
- Developing the youth workforce
- Promoting positive public perceptions of young people.

We deliver our work through training and consultancy, campaigning, publishing and online communications. Through our activities we want to ensure that young people have a strong voice and positive influence in our society.

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