
Measuring what matters: What our evaluation of Plan B taught us – and what we can do for your VRU

By Ciaran McDonald and Iona Nixon

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Introduction

Violence Reduction Units across the country are wrestling with the same challenge: **how to evidence impact in complex, human-centred interventions**. Navigator programmes – whether located in custody suites, hospitals and/or the community – work in the spaces between crisis and change, aiming to meet people at a **reachable and teachable moment**, build trust quickly, and create the conditions for long-term change away from future violence. These approaches recognise that meaningful change begins with relationships, timing, trust and opportunity. However, while navigator programmes are popular and expanding, VRUs face a common challenge: **how to evidence impact credibly, robustly and in ways that reflect the real process of change**.

Our recent independent evaluation of [Plan B](#), the South Yorkshire VRU's custody navigator service, provides a clear demonstration of what high-quality impact evaluation can offer – with important lessons not only about **what works**, but also **how to measure what works**. It shows how a mixed methods, desistance theory-informed approach can capture the real influence of a navigator model in understanding the mechanisms, behaviours and conditions that reduce harm over time – an approach we can bring for other VRUs considering how to understand, strengthen and demonstrate the impact of their own navigator programmes.

Why traditional evaluation approaches fall short

Navigator models are relational, flexible and person-centred. This is a strength – but it makes traditional impact measurement harder, as they don't fit neatly into the logic of input → output → impact. Desistance from crime is not linear; people relapse, recover and grow at different speeds, and external systems (e.g., housing, health) shape outcomes as much as individual factors. For many people, progress often looks like two steps forward followed by one step back.

This complexity means VRUs need evaluation approaches that:

- Capture impact beyond binary reoffending metrics
- Track progress across multiple domains and levels
- Link emerging outcomes to long-term reductions in violence
- Measure *quality* as well as quantity of change
- Understand not just *if* a model works, but *how* and *for whom*

Our evaluation of Plan B was designed with this in mind.

Rocket Science's evaluation of Plan B: A mixed methods approach grounded in desistance theory

Plan B operates in three South Yorkshire custody suites – Barnsley, Doncaster and Shepcote – working with people aged 16 and over who are detained for suspected involvement in violent offences. Navigators meet individuals in custody, build rapport and, for those ready for change, offer intensive community-based support. The model focuses on stabilisation, emotional regulation, practical problem-solving and linking people into wider services.

South Yorkshire VRU wanted to understand the full picture of Plan B: **Is the service working? How? For whom? And what next?**

To answer these questions robustly, we designed an evaluation that combined:

1. Level 4 quasi-experimental design

Using crime, custody and programme data, we created a matched comparison group to test Plan B's impact across a range of reoffending outcomes. This enabled us to compare Plan B clients with similar individuals who were eligible but not engaged.

2. Qualitative research

We carried out detailed interviews with clients, family members and navigators; developed 360-degree client case studies; and facilitated staff focus groups. This allowed us to understand mechanisms of change and the barriers inside and outside the service.

3. Over-time measurement using SDQ data

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire data provided insights into emotional, behavioural, attentional, relational and social change among clients – areas we know from desistance theory are precursors to reduced offending.

4. A desistance-informed theoretical foundation

Our methodological design was framed by a recognition that desistance is a long process shaped by identity, relationships, opportunities and emotional capacity.

This mixed methods design meant we could capture both **extrinsic** outcomes (e.g., engagement with support services) and **intrinsic** outcomes (e.g., emotions, resilience, relationships, confidence, self-identity) – giving the VRU a comprehensive, credible picture of impact.

What we found: Meaningful change, even in complex contexts

Reoffending findings reflect the realities of desistance

Our quasi-experimental analysis found **no statistically significant relationship** between Plan B client status and:

- Likelihood of reoffending
- Number of reoffences
- Time to reoffending
- Severity of reoffending

This pattern is not surprising. Desistance theory makes clear that behavioural change unfolds over long timescales – often many years – and that short-term reoffending data is therefore rarely a sufficient standalone measure of impact.

However, our dataset allowed us to examine Plan B *graduates* separately. Here we found something notable: **graduates committed significantly fewer and lower severity reoffences than non-graduates**. This early signal suggests that completing the Plan B journey matters, and that graduation is associated with safer behaviour over time.

Rich evidence of meaningful change in people's lives

The SDQ data and qualitative consultation revealed consistent improvements among Plan B clients in relation to:

- Emotional wellbeing
- Anger management
- Attention and concentration
- Peer relationships
- Pro-social behaviours
- Coping and problem-solving skills

Clients also reported reduced drug and alcohol use; improved relationships with family members and peers; increased engagement with mental health, housing and employment support services; and a greater sense of hope and stability. Family members confirmed these patterns, often describing feeling safer, less distressed and more optimistic about the future.

These are exactly the kinds of changes that criminological research tells us precede long-term desistance.

The client-navigator relationship is central to impact

Plan B clients frequently described their navigator as:

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- Non-judgemental
- Trustworthy
- Authentic (particularly those with lived experience)
- Emotionally attuned
- Consistent

Navigator gender and lived experience were especially important mediators of trust. Where clients felt well-matched, engagement deepened and outcomes strengthened.

For VRUs and delivery partners, this underscores the importance of workforce composition, training, supervision and trauma-informed practice.

What this means for VRUs

Our evaluation of Plan B has revealed several wider lessons relevant to any VRU commissioning navigator-style interventions:

1. Impact is visible – if you know where to look.

Short-term reoffending metrics alone will not capture the real-world impact of these models. To meaningfully evidence impact, VRUs need evaluation designs that, reflecting the realities of desistance, also measure changes in emotional, behavioural, relational and other stability-based outcomes.

2. Theories of change grounded in desistance matter.

Without an appropriate theoretical framework, interventions risk being judged on unrealistic short-term metrics.

3. Mixed methods approaches offer stronger, more credible narratives.

Quantitative analysis tells you *what* changed; qualitative research explains *why*. Being able to triangulate quantitative outcomes with qualitative insights gives commissioners the kind of confident, rounded evidence case that secures continued investment.

4. Data systems must be designed for impact, not just tick-box monitoring.

Strengthening monitoring practices, case management systems, custody data access, SDQ administration and client follow-up processes enables VRUs to build more powerful impact claims over time.

5. VRUs need evaluation partners who understand the complexity of violence prevention and reduction.

Navigator models operate at the intersection of trauma, crisis, poverty, policing and health. Accurately understanding their impact requires a nuanced approach that is both rigorous and human-centred – the two core elements of Rocket Science’s approach to evaluation.

How we can support your VRU

Our work on Plan B demonstrates our ability to deliver:

- **Level 4 quasi-experimental impact assessments**
- **Robust, mixed methods evaluation designs tailored to your specific context**
- **Theory-driven design and analysis using desistance, trauma-informed and public health frameworks**
- **Sensitive qualitative research with traditionally hard-to-engage individuals**
- **Actionable recommendations that support service improvement**
- **Accessible, compelling reporting for commissioning audiences and wider stakeholders**

Whether you want to evaluate a navigator model, community outreach initiative, schools-based programme or grant-funded violence reduction/prevention intervention, we can help you understand:

- **What impact you’re making**
- **How and why your intervention drives change**
- **What’s working well, and for whom**
- **Where improvements will have most effect**
- **How to evidence value convincingly to funders and partners**

If your VRU wants to deepen its understanding of impact, improve its evidence base or strengthen future funding bids, we’d be happy to talk – please don’t hesitate to reach out!

Ciaran McDonald, Senior Consultant and Rocket Science VRU lead:
ciaran.mcdonald@rocketsciencelab.co.uk | [LinkedIn](#)

Iona Nixon, Consultant and Rocket Science VRU specialist:
iona.nixon@rocketsciencelab.co.uk | [LinkedIn](#)

About Rocket Science

Rocket Science is a social purpose business, working towards a future where everyone can live healthy, happy, and fulfilling lives.

Our objectives are to help our clients reimagine systems, maximise investment to have the greatest impact and transform lifetime outcomes using a whole-person and prevention lens. We do this through research, mapping and analysis, evaluation and impact measurement, strategy and service design, participatory and peer research, learning, collaboration, and end to end fund management.

Please contact Ciaran McDonald for more information.

ciaran.mcdonald@rocketsciencelab.co.uk

rocketsciencelab.co.uk

Edinburgh | London | Newcastle

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