

GPS electronic tags – monitoring young people at risk of criminal exploitation and repeat offending

Using GPS electronic tags to support the rehabilitation of offenders and reduce the risk of reoffending.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Independently evaluated
Purpose	Reoffending
Topic	Offender management
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Region	South East
Partners	Police Community safety partnership Education Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation

Key details

Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	June 2020
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Children and young people Families Offenders

Aim

The GPS electronic tag programme aims to:

- divert individuals from reoffending by encouraging them to make better choices
- support victims at risk of exploitation by giving them an excuse to refuse committing criminal offences
- encourage individuals to access support services and employment opportunities
- repair relationships between individuals and their families

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes are to:

- reduce the number of offences committed by tagged young people
- increase tagged young peoples' engagement with support services
- reduce tagged young peoples' contact with peers engaged in criminal activity
- improve tagged young peoples' wellbeing, education and employment outcomes

Description

The Kent and Medway Violence Reduction Unit (KMVRU), funded by the Home Office, is focused on reducing violence among young people. Electronic tags allow the force to track individual's movements by fitting them with an ankle tag. A brand of electronic tags called Buddi tags were already used within force by the Integrated Offender Management (IOM) team. This was only for individuals being monitored post prison release.

The KMVRU identified that the Buddi tags could be used to support young people at risk of criminal exploitation or repeat offending. The tags would provide them with a physical reminder that their movements were being tracked by the police.

Buddi tag

The Buddi tag was first used on a singular test case of a young person involved in gang violence. The initiative was then rolled out on a wider scale to include young people who are deemed to be high harm offenders or at risk of criminal exploitation.

Young people can be referred to the Buddi tag programme by external agencies such as the youth offending team, early help or social services. The referring agency can discuss the young person's circumstances, behaviour and attitude with the KMVRU Buddi tag coordinator. A decision is then made regarding the young person's suitability to take part in the scheme. The young person doesn't have to have committed any offences or been arrested to be eligible for the scheme, the coordinator has discretion to decide who is eligible to take part.

Participation in the programme relies on the young person's consent and is offered to those looking at reducing their reoffending. The KMVRU emphasises the benefits Buddi tags can provide to young people when engaging with them about joining the scheme, such as young people can prove where they were at a given time if their parents or the police ask. Participation is entirely voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time.

If the use of the Buddi tag is agreed, then a lead worker will be nominated to receive updates from the KMVRU about the young person's movements. The KMVRU has provided training to partner agencies to enable them to fit the Buddi tags themselves. This enables young people who may be cautious about engaging with the police to still take part in the intervention.

The KMVRU also ensures that the young person is receiving other forms of support alongside the Buddi tag. The Buddi tag can facilitate further engagement and encourage young people to attend

education, training and working opportunities.

Normally the agreement between the KMVRU, referral agency and young person is for the Buddi tag to be put in place for six weeks. This can be ended early or extended depending on how the young person is finding the experience and whether they feel having the tag is still useful.

If an individual decides they no longer wish to engage in the initiative, they must contact the KMVRU to arrange for removal. If a tag is damaged or intentionally removed, then the young person may be charged with criminal damage.

Location tracking and alerts

Once a Buddi tag is put in place, the KMVRU can monitor that individual's location at any time. They may contact the young person to ask questions about their movements if anything of concern is identified, this helps build rapport between them and the police which increases engagement.

Other agencies and individuals outside the police do not have access to the location history information. The KMVRU can arrange for automated alerts to be sent to individuals when the tagged young person leaves a certain area or breaks curfew.

The KMVRU can also arrange for Buddi Ltd. to carry out 24-hour monitoring for high-risk individuals at an additional cost. In these cases, the KMVRU develops a response plan to ensure Buddi know when to alert the police and partner agencies.

Removal

When the Buddi tag is removed, the young person and their referrer complete a removal survey. This is a reflective practice which involves discussing the reasons the tag was put in place in the first place, what concerns the referrer had, and how the tag has changed the young person's behaviour. This is also an opportunity for the young person to provide feedback to Buddi Ltd. and the KMVRU.

Equipment

Buddi Ltd. are the current provider of the tagging equipment and the software platform. Kent Police hire equipment monthly and are charged set fees for lost/damaged equipment.

Loss/damage costs are as follows:

- tag – £400
- beacon – £135
- on-body charger – £95
- strap – £40

Evaluation

Between June 2023 and June 2024, a team at the University of Kent evaluated the Buddi tag programme in an uncontrolled study involving 57 young people aged 12 to 22. They followed up participants for up to nine months after tag removal, allowing data collection through to January 2025.

Findings suggest that the Buddi tag programme is an effective addition to other support offered to young people at risk of exploitation.

Follow-up data from 36 young people suggest that the Buddi tag programme was associated with sustained reductions in both suspected offences and episodes of going missing. For example, suspected offences dropped from an average of five in the three months prior to tag fitting to 1.7 in the final three-month follow-up period (seven to nine months after tag removal). Missing days fell from three to 1.4 over the same timeframe. These changes were not attributable to young people moving out of area.

Assuming these reductions in suspected violent offences reflect true prevention, this equates to approximately 30 avoided offences, translating into potential societal savings of £177,900 to £421,500, based on Home Office estimates.

With a delivery cost of approximately £935 per young person (or £33,660 for the 36 with follow-up data), the estimated net benefit to society is between £144,240 and £387,840. This represents a return of around three to eight times the programme's cost, highlighting its promise as a cost-effective intervention for reducing violence related behaviours.

Young people reported that the programme supported behavioural change, including reductions in street activity, shifts in peer networks, and engagement in alternative activities. While some practical concerns were raised about the device's size, comfort, and charging process, these are

being addressed by the tag provider.

A key factor in the programme's success was the role of Buddi tag coordinators. Their work in building trust with young people and families, promoting sustained positive behaviours, monitoring wellbeing, and liaising with other services was instrumental in achieving positive outcomes. A [full evaluation of the Buddi programme](#) is also available.

Overall impact

Statistics

Over 300 young people have accessed the Buddi tag scheme. Over the course of the evaluation period, 69 young people were referred to the Buddi tag programme. Of these, 11 declined to take part in the evaluation. Buddi tags were fitted for 58 young people on at least one occasion, but one participant wore the tag for less than a day and was excluded, leaving 57 young people in the evaluation.

The evaluation found that the percentage of the 57 young people with suspected offences decreased from 77% in the three months prior to the tag fitting, to 43% in the four to six months after the tag's removal. The percentage who were reported as being missing from home decreased from 36% in the three months before the fitting to 26% in the four to six months after the tag was removed.

Additionally, out of the 57 young people engaged in the evaluation, 32 demonstrated positive outcomes, as recorded by the Buddi tag coordinator. These outcomes included re-engagement with support services, accessing additional assistance, parents reconnecting with support networks, and returning to education or training.

19 young people faced challenges such as continued offending, ongoing family barriers or disengaging with the VRU, while five moved to a different area during the programme.

This data highlights a balance between positive engagement and ongoing difficulties. Notably, the most common outcome, seen in 51.6% of cases, was that the young person became engaged or re-engaged with support services, indicating meaningful progress toward active involvement in available support systems.

However, some cases (12.3%) ended with tag removal due to continued offending, reflecting the complex and persistent nature of behaviour change. These findings underscore the varied experiences of young people, illustrating both successes and the enduring behavioural, situational, and systemic barriers they face.

Interviews with young people

Interviews with 31 young people provided more detail about how exactly the Buddi tag program had helped them.

Many described altering their routines, such as going out less or getting home earlier. Others spoke about shifting their social circles, distancing themselves from peers who may have led them into risky situations, with comments like “I changed friends” and “it helped me stay away from certain people.”

Several young people said the tag gave them a socially acceptable reason to avoid exploitative or uncomfortable situations, explaining that “I could use the tag as an excuse if I didn’t want to do anything” and “people would see it and not give me alcohol or not want to be with me, which I know was a good thing.”

Whilst others described re-engaging with positive activities, such as one young person who said, “I got involved in boxing again.” These insights suggest that the tag, alongside the support provided, helped some young people take steps toward safer and more structured lifestyles.

Young people also reported a number of positive effects from engaging with the programme:

- improved behaviour – any respondents noted that the intervention helped them make better choices, stay away from negative influences, and avoid trouble
- support and accountability – several mentioned feeling supported and held accountable by the programme, which helped them comply with conditions or improve their relationships
- positive feedback from others – a few highlighted how others noticed improvements in their behaviour
- self-reflection – the programme enabled self-reflection, prompting realizations about poor choices and the impact of their actions
- compliance challenges – some struggled with charging the device or maintaining its use consistently

- perceived burdens – complaints about physical discomfort and restrictions associated with the intervention were evident

Improved engagement with services

Field notes and interviews with both young people and professionals highlighted that one of the most valuable aspects of the programme was the strong, consistent relationship built between the Buddi tag team and the young person while the tag was being worn. This frequent contact, combined with location monitoring, allowed for timely and targeted interventions that helped to keep young people safe.

Professionals noted that location data was particularly useful for identifying patterns of risk. For example, one young person was found to be regularly visiting an abandoned building late at night, prompting local services to intervene. The data also helped build trust and transparency with families:

"I get the location report on a Monday and forward it to the parent or guardian—we have a conversation about it."

The tracking information also supported intelligence sharing and resource coordination across services:

"It helps us track their movements, link them to areas where there are crimes or concerns, and direct support to those areas to prevent crime and exploitation."

"We can even use it to prove they weren't in a location when something happened, showing they weren't involved."

Professionals consistently reported that wearing the tag often led to increased engagement with other services, which was key to improving outcomes. In some cases, this included practical incentives:

"We work closely with the council. There's a pot of money... 'If you agree to have the tag, we'll pay for you to join a local football team.'"

However, several professionals also raised concerns about the need for follow-up support once the tag is removed. Without sustained engagement, the risk of reverting to previous behaviours

remains:

"It works really well while they're wearing it, but we don't always have the resources to maintain the same level of support afterwards."

"It's a great tool in the moment. But without something in place afterwards, we risk them falling back into old habits."

Service contact data after tag removal supports this picture of ongoing engagement:

- 18 young people had contact with the youth offending team
- 14 were part of the supporting families cohort
- 19 engaged with the early help team
- 17 received support from specialist children's services

These figures suggest that many young people remained connected to support systems after the tag was removed, although professionals highlighted the need to strengthen this longer-term safety net.

Buddi tags also have a positive reputation, with young people asking partner agencies to be put on the initiative.

Engagement with other forces

The KMVRU have created a Buddi tag national working group to provide a forum for forces to discuss the initiative and decide on best practice. This is currently attended by 20 forces and takes place every other month.

Learning

Senior leadership were engaged and supportive of the programme once the first case study demonstrated the usefulness of the Buddi tags. They allowed the KMVRU to be creative and flexible with its implementation, allowing them to offer the initiative to any young person they felt it would help. To achieve this, the standard operating procedure for this initiative is vague in detailing the requirements a young person must meet to be given a tag, in order to give the KMVRU discretion over their use.

Partner agencies were very positive about the initiative, viewing the Buddi tags as another tool at their disposal for supporting young people. They felt involved in the process, especially as the KMVRU offered training on how to fit the tags, enabling them to take the lead on getting young people involved in the initiative.

It was relatively easy to get young people's buy in as the KMVRU only offered the initiative to those they felt were at a reachable moment because they'd already demonstrated a willingness to engage. Subsequently, it was a matter of stressing the benefits wearing the tag could bring. It's important not to try and force a young person to wear one, as if they damage it or try to remove it then could face criminal prosecution and worsen their situation.

Buddi Ltd. have responded well to the feedback young people have given during the removal survey. For example, young people have raised concerns about the battery life and water resistance of the tag, which Buddi Ltd. have then altered. The KMVRU also raised concerns over the tags losing signal when the young people took the tube in London, Buddi Ltd. have since fixed this issue.

Best available evidence

The [Crime Reduction Toolkit](#) includes the best-available evidence on [electronic monitoring of offenders](#).

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