



Cabinet Member Report

Decision Maker:	Councillor Heather Acton, Cabinet Member for Communities and Regeneration
Date:	29th November 2021
Classification:	General Release
Title:	Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy 2021 - 2026
Wards Affected:	All
Key Decision:	An entry was included in the Forward Plan of Key Decisions on 26 th October 2021 enabling a decision to be made from 23 rd November 2021.
City For All	Thriving Communities
Financial Summary:	There are limited financial implications associated with the VAWG Strategy recommendations. There are additional staffing costs of approximately £10k per annum in relation to the VAWG Strategic Lead post which will be met by the Service within existing budgets and funding streams.
Report of:	Wayne Chance-McKay, Head of City Operations Shabana Kausar, Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategic Lead Boroughs of Westminster, Hammersmith & Fulham, and Kensington & Chelsea

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is the umbrella term used to describe a range of violent and abusive acts and behaviours, which are predominantly, but not exclusively, directed against women and girls. This term and its definition adopted by the United Nations is used to describe abuse against all genders but highlights the disproportionate impact on women and girls.
- 1.2 Westminster City Council (the Council) is a responsible authority member of the Safer Westminster Partnership (SWP) which is the statutory community safety partnership under the Crime and Disorder Act 1999; amended Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011. VAWG is a strategic priority for the SWP and is overseen by the multi-agency bi-borough VAWG Strategic Board and VAWG Partnership.

- 1.3 The Council within its previous tri-borough shared service arrangement with Royal Borough Kensington & Chelsea (RBKC) and Hammersmith & Fulham (H&F) published its inaugural VAWG Strategy in 2015-2018. This was followed by an addendum covering 2018-2021. This Strategy described the measures the VAWG Partnership would take to respond to end VAWG.
- 1.4 The Council is seeking to adopt a new VAWG Strategy for 2021-2026 which is a co-produced partnership document. Survivors, community voluntary and faith groups, multi-agency professionals, residents and businesses have all contributed to the development of the strategy, which builds on the previous work and sets out the new strategic direction of our coordinated community response, where everyone understands the role they play in ending VAWG.
- 1.5 H&F no longer sits on the VAWG Strategic Board, therefore the VAWG Strategy 2021-2026 will be owned and overseen by Westminster Council and RBKC only.
- 1.6 If the recommendations are approved, the strategy will be published from December 2021, and officers will then develop with partners a sovereign Westminster Action Plan for approval and delivery against the Strategy from Spring 2022.

2.0 Recommendations

- (i) That the Cabinet Member for Communities and Regeneration approves the Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy 2021 – 2026.
- (ii) That delegated authority is given to the Director of Public Protection and Licensing to approve minor modifications and updates to the Strategy, such as changes in legislation, in collaboration with the Cabinet Member for Communities and Regeneration.
- (iii) That delegated authority is given to the Director of Public Protection and Licensing to develop a partnership Action Plan to deliver the Strategy, in collaboration with the Cabinet Member for Communities and Regeneration from Spring 2022.
- (iv) That these recommendations, if approved, will be implemented from 13th December 2021.

3.0 Reason for Decision

- 3.1 The Council must publish and implement a refreshed VAWG Strategy, following the expiration of the current Strategy in 2021 and to take account of national updates to legislation and national advice provided in response to recent high-profile cases.

4.0 Background

Definition

4.1 VAWG violates human rights, and is recognised as a National and Mayor's Office for Police and Crime (MOPAC) priority. VAWG includes but is not limited to the following types of abuses:

- Domestic abuse (including coercive control)
- Rape and sexual violence
- Female genital mutilation
- Early and Forced marriage
- So called "honour" based violence
- Faith-based abuse
- Sexual harassment
- Stalking
- Trafficking
- Prostitution/Sexual Exploitation

National Context

4.2 The difficulty of capturing an accurate statistical picture of VAWG is nationally recognised. Reasons for this are the hidden nature and consistent under-reporting of VAWG, alongside inconsistent approaches to data collection across organisations. However, we know that nationally:

- In 2017/18 c.2 million adults aged 16 to 59 experienced domestic abuse, equating to a prevalence rate of approximately 6 in 100 adults.
- Women are around twice as likely to experience domestic abuse than men. In 2017/18 7.9% were female victims (1.3 million) and 4.2% were male victims (695,000)
- 2 women are killed every week (1 woman killed every 3 days) in England and Wales by a current or former partner
- 1 in 5 women have been subject to stalking or harassment at some point in their lives.
- c.750,000 children in the UK experience domestic abuse.

Westminster Context

4.3 VAWG can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, race, disability, class, or sexuality. However, we do know that it disproportionately impacts women and girls. Based on

national research and applying this to our resident population in Westminster¹ , it is estimated that:

- 22% (27, 593) of women will experience domestic abuse at some point in their lives
- 2% (2619) of women have undergone female genital mutilation
- 14% (18,395) of women have experienced stalking or harassment at some point in their lives

4.4 In Westminster, during the financial year 2020/21:

- 1,249 victims were referred into the Angelou Partnership, the main commissioned VAWG service. This is a 10% increase from the previous year.
- 557 victims were identified as at high-risk of immediate risk of harm and referred to the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC).
- 20% of service users who accessed the Angelou Partnership had additional vulnerabilities such as mental health or substance use.

4.5 During COVID19 lockdown, needs became more complex with victims of abuse having to lockdown with their abusers. In addition, a focus on a number of national high-profile incidents have put the spotlight on VAWG and as a result there has been an increase in referrals to support services, in particular self-referrals which rose by 46% from the previous year.

4.6 Since 2015, Westminster has undertaken four independent reviews in response to four domestic homicides.

5.0 Local Authority Responsibilities & Governance

Statutory Duties

5.1 Everyone in the Council is responsible for responding to VAWG and multiple teams respond as part of their 'core business,' including adult safeguarding, children's safeguarding, community safety and housing. Local Authorities have several statutory obligations in responding to VAWG, including those that fall under:

- Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003
- Care Act 2014
- Forced Marriage Act 2014
- Serious Crime Act 2015

¹ [Based on Male & Female Population Estimates National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)

5.2 The recent Domestic Abuse Act 2021 has also placed additional duties on Local Authorities including:

- Adopting a statutory definition of domestic abuse that states domestic abuse is not just physical violence, but can also be emotional, coercive, controlling, or economic abuse. As part of this definition, children will be explicitly recognised as victims if they see, hear, or otherwise experience the effects of abuse.
- Establishing a Domestic Abuse Commissioner, whose role it will be to stand up for victims and survivors, raise public awareness, monitor the response of Local Authorities, the justice system and other statutory agencies, and hold them to account.
- Providing support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in refuges and other safe accommodation.
- To automatically give 'priority need' status to all eligible homeless victims of domestic abuse.
- To respond to the national Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Strategy once published by the Secretary of State (to be published as part of a holistic domestic abuse strategy).

5.3 In light of the above duties and changes, Local Authorities are expected to increase and strengthen their response to VAWG. Our strategy responds directly to these requirements and officers will continue to strengthen our local response, which has been recognised by the Home Office as best practice.

Governance

5.4 Locally the response to VAWG is overseen by the VAWG Strategic Partnership Board. This was previously a tri-borough arrangement across Westminster, Royal Borough Kensington and Chelsea and Hammersmith and Fulham, however has since moved to a bi-borough arrangement between Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea only. The Strategic board is made up of Senior Management Officers across Council departments as well as strategic multi-agency representatives.

5.5 The VAWG Strategic Partnership Board has oversight over the VAWG Strategy, the action plan, and the strategic response to VAWG as part of the coordinated community response. The Board reports to the statutory boards set out in the diagram below and is chaired by the Head of Service for Children's Services. There are six operational groups which focus on delivering specific areas of work and in supporting the multi-agency response to VAWG. The VAWG strategy and theory of change model will provide a framework for these operational groups.



6.0 Key Achievements from the Current VAWG Strategy 2015

6.1 Since launching the first VAWG Strategy in 2015, the partnership has had a number of key achievements including:

- Delivering a number of projects aimed at creating ‘systems change’ in identifying and responding to VAWG. These include the Whole Health Project, the Whole Housing Project, the Safe & Together Model working with social workers and Standing Together’s ‘In Search of Excellence’ report into best practice approaches to VAWG. These projects have focused on change on a strategic and operational level where everyone understands the role they play in ending VAWG.
- Leading partners in the delivery of two European projects focusing on coordinating a European response to VAWG; the Europeans Communities Against Trafficking Project with Italian and Greek partners, and the Domestic Violence: Coordinating the Intervention Project with Romanian, Spanish, and Greek partners. These projects have elevated our work and best practice work on a European-wide level.
- Created a rapid response to the challenges of COVID-19. This included guidance on our websites, briefings for professionals, extraordinary meetings to respond to emerging need, a poster campaign to raise awareness in the community and activities and events planned across the 16 Days of Activism to mark the United Nations Day of Elimination of Violence against Women.
- Securing funding from the Home Office to deliver ‘Meeting Survivors Where They Are.’ This project aims to meet the needs of families who experience multiple disadvantages through a new team of professionals embedded in the Angelou Partnership to support them more effectively, based on their individual needs and over longer periods of time. This project also involved an independent evaluation which looked at the impact of the

service and the wider VAWG partnership. This evaluation informed future commissioning of services and was recognised by the Home Office as best practice.

7.0 VAWG Strategy 2021- 2026: An Overview

7.1 The VAWG Strategy is attached as Appendix A.

7.2 The Strategy outlines the Coordinated Community Response (CCR) to VAWG. The CCR is the approach which recognises that it is everyone's responsibility to tackle VAWG, encouraging all agencies to work together to ensure the best support for survivors wherever they are on their journey.

7.3 To ensure we are embedding the CCR, the VAWG strategy is a co-produced partnership document. Survivors, community voluntary and faith groups, multi-agency professionals, residents and businesses have all contributed to the development of the strategy.

7.4 The strategy will cover a five-year period and is a bi-borough strategy with RBKC, outlining the shared approach, whilst acknowledging the varying profile of issues across the two boroughs. Following the publication of the Strategy, each sovereign borough will develop a targeted one-year Action Plan with partners on how the strategy will be implemented and how progress and success will be measured. The VAWG Strategic Board will hold officers to account against delivery on their action plans with oversight and input also being sought from Policy & Scrutiny, the Health and Well-being Board and the Safer Westminster Partnership.

Strategy Content Summary

7.5 The strategy includes:

- **Introduction:** the aim of the strategy, how it has been co-produced and including a quick guide for different agencies to see which part of the strategy is most relevant for them.
- **What is VAWG:** setting out the context, this section will discuss definitions of VAWG, why it happens and includes a 'myth buster' table for common misconceptions.
- **What experts through experience have told us:** this is a dedicated section to the voices and experiences of survivors and what they have highlighted needs to be our partnership response to VAWG.
- **Local Picture:** setting out the data profile of VAWG across the two boroughs.

- **Our Approach:** setting out what our Coordinated Community Response looks like and what our Theory of Change model approach is.
- **Our Objectives:** this section discuss each of our four objectives (i) VAWG is prevented ii) Victims are supported iii) Partnership working to end VAWG and iv) Abusers are held to account and why they will make a difference. It also includes suggestions from partners on how individual, community, professional and society can contribute towards each objective.

7.6 Promotion clips and quotes from different partners are also included throughout the strategy, along with local case studies demonstrating the Coordinated Community Response to VAWG in action.

8.0 Consultation

8.1 Consultations were held in March 2021, and partnership consultations are ongoing. To date, the following partners have been consulted:

- Workshop with VAWG Strategic Board March 2021
- Survivor consultation: 3 workshops held in April/May 2021 with 19 participants
- Theory of Change stakeholder workshop: April 2021 with 41 participants
- Resident's survey: 257 responses were received from across Westminster and RBKC borough. 36% were representative of Westminster.

8.2 Respondents shared their thoughts on our four objectives:

- VAWG is prevented
- Victims are supported
- Partnership working to end VAWG
- Abusers are held to account.

8.3 Discussions ranged from the need for long-term support for victims who experience multiple disadvantages, to raising awareness in schools and with communities in their role in ending VAWG. All respondents shared the view that VAWG is a local priority and more needs to be done in the local response.

8.4 Survivors told us about the need for professionals to be better trained in identifying and responding to VAWG and the need for therapeutic support. They highlighted the need for on-going support which moved beyond immediate crisis support and which was need, rather than risk led. Many also emphasised the need to challenge harmful victim-blaming attitudes which do not hold the perpetrator to account.

- 8.5 Residents shared their concerns about feeling safe in the borough, particularly at night with 45% (42 respondents) in Westminster stating they felt fairly to very unsafe. Residents also expressed low levels of confidence in being able to support a friend or family member if they are experiencing abuse, highlighting the need to strengthen awareness and the coordinated community response.
- 8.6 Professionals highlighted that they want to improve their knowledge on available services for survivors and to be supported to work with, and hold to account, perpetrators. They emphasised the need for training and improvements in services supporting survivors who experience multiple disadvantages.

9.0 Equalities Impact Assessment

- 9.1 The Council must have regard to its public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. In summary, section 149 provides that a Public Authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; and
 - (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristics and persons who do not share it.
- 9.2 Section 149 (7) of the Equality Act 2010 defines the relevant protected characteristics as age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
- 9.3 An Equalities Impact Assessment has been conducted and the council believes that the policy does not impact adversely or discriminate unlawfully against any protected characteristics.

10.0 Financial Implications

- 10.1 There are limited financial implications associated with the VAWG Strategy recommendations. The significant impact will be the additional staffing costs incurred by the Council and Kensington and Chelsea in relation to the VAWG Strategic Lead post. This impact is because of the move from a Tri-Borough to a Bi-Borough cost sharing arrangement from April 2022. The increase in costs will be approximately £10,000 per annum, subject to inflation. This increase will be met by the Service within existing budgets and funding streams.

11.0 Legal Implications

- 11.1 The Domestic Abuse and Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy contributes towards the Council's corporate vision and strategy 'City for All' for 2021-2022. This has four pillars, one vision being a "Vibrant Community" which includes a commitment to "Work with our partners to tackle the key anti-social issues faced by our communities."
- 11.2 The Domestic Abuse Act was enacted into law in April 2021. This Act has for the first time created a statutory definition of domestic abuse, to ensure that domestic abuse is properly understood, considered unacceptable, and actively challenged, across statutory agencies and in public attitudes. This Act further increases the need for co-operation across public services, particularly when it comes to meeting the new duties placed on the local authority around housing provision and delivery of support to survivors of domestic abuse in accommodation-based services.
- 11.3 The proposed VAWG strategy also complies with several of the Council's key safeguarding duties. The Children Act 1989, confers a duty on the Council to protect children and young people from abuse and neglect and to promote the welfare of all children and young people in their area (sections 17, 20, 31 and 47 of the 1989 Act). Section 11 of the Children Act 2004 places duties on a council to ensure its functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Section 10 of 2004 Act and Section 27 of the 1989 Act refers to the requirement for local authorities to cooperate with other agencies to promote the well-being of children.
- 11.4 The provisions of the Care Act 2014 are intended to promote and secure wellbeing of vulnerable adults in the Council's area. Under the definition of wellbeing, it is made clear that protection from abuse and neglect is a fundamental part of that. The specific safeguarding duties on local authorities in England are set out in s.42 of the Care Act 2014. This imposes a duty to promote well-being and the duty of enquiry. Where a local authority has reasonable cause to suspect an adult is experiencing, or is at risk of, abuse or neglect, and as a result of those needs is unable to protect themselves against abuse or neglect or the risk of it, the local authority must make enquiries. The statutory guidance accompanying Care Act 2014 indicates abuse to encompass physical abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, modern slavery, discriminatory abuse, organisational abuse and neglect, as well as financial abuse.
- 11.5 Other legislation referred to in paragraph 5.1. above, will also underpin the Council's need for a VAWG strategy.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: VAWG Strategy 2021-2026

Appendix B: Equality Impact Assessment

BACKGROUND PAPERS none

**If you have any queries about this report, please contact Shabana Kausar
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For completion by the **Cabinet Member for Communities and Regeneration**

Declaration of Interest

I have <no interest to declare / to declare an interest> in respect of this report

Signed: _____ Date: _____

NAME: _____

State nature of interest if any

.....
(N.B: If you have an interest, you should seek advice as to whether it is appropriate to make a decision in relation to this matter)

For the reasons set out above, I agree the recommendation(s) in the report entitled

.....and reject any alternative options which are referred to but not recommended.

Signed

Cabinet Member for Communities and Regeneration

Date

If you have any additional comment which you would want actioned in connection with your decision you should discuss this with the report author and then set out your comment below before the report and this pro-forma is returned to the Secretariat for processing.

Additional comment:
.....
.....

If you do not wish to approve the recommendations, or wish to make an alternative decision, it is important that you consult the report author, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Strategic Director Finance and Performance and, if there are resources implications, the Strategic Director of Resources (or their representatives) so that (1) you can be made aware of any further relevant considerations that you should take into account before making the decision and (2) your reasons for the decision can be properly identified and recorded, as required by law.

Note to Cabinet Member: Your decision will now be published and copied to the Members of the relevant Policy & Scrutiny Committee. If the decision falls within the criteria for call-in, it will not be implemented until five working days have elapsed from publication to allow the Policy and Scrutiny Committee to decide whether it wishes to call the matter in.